



My kind of MAGIC

Belle Grooves

MY KIND OF Magic

BY BELLE GROOVES



This is for two people on a yellow couch.

I stumbled through the door and collapsed by the fireplace, its warmth bringing feeling back into my body. I sat up and saw Jules with her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide. I smiled tiredly at her, and she knelt beside me.

"Sebastian, what are you doing here? What . . . What happened to you?" she asked.

I shrugged. "It's fine, I promise."

She shook her head. "You're terrible at lying. Let me see."

I grimaced as I pulled my arm from the shirt. Julia gasped when she saw it, and I winced at her reaction. There was a handprint on my arm where the guards had punched me, though it wasn't red and fading, as it would be on most other arms. It was a dark blue color and black, similar to a bruise. I pulled my shirt over the mark and leaned back against the heated stones around the fireplace.

"Sebastian, you don't have to keep doing this," Jules whispered.

I closed my eyes. "Yes, I do. There isn't anyone else who can."

She took my hands. "You think because of who you are, because of what they've done, that you're somehow different from everyone else? You have something most others don't, but that doesn't mean you have to keep going out there and trying. He'll never stop, Sebastian."

"Then neither will I," I answered.

"What if they aren't alive?"

I sat up and looked at her troubled brown gaze. I brushed her hair behind her ear and sighed. "They are. They know something. The Sovereign has to keep them alive."

"Well, in any case, it isn't safe for you here. They know too much about you. You should go home."

I nodded. "I hate it there. It's so hollow without them."

Jules stood and pulled me up with her. "You have your sister, Sebastian."

"I know." I kissed Julia and pulled the door open. "Be safe, love."

She smiled. "You should tell yourself that sometime."

I shook my head and closed the door, leaving her safely behind. Well, as safe as one could be with the Elite pacing from house to house. The Elite, obviously, were the Sovereign's guards. They were dangerous, especially to people like me. You see, I have something most people fear. Something that I'm not supposed to have, not allowed to have. A thing that has been outlawed for . . . Well, not that long to be honest. It's called magic. You've probably heard of it, and I bet you've been told that it's not real. I'm here to tell you

that's a lie. Magic is very real. It's very powerful. It's very difficult to control. Most importantly, however, it must be respected. Magic is a living thing, like a breath. You can't see it, not really. It's a disturbance in the air, a shimmer. Sometimes it's glittery, and it sparkles, but only if you know what you're doing. Most people don't know they're magical. I know I'm magical because of who I am and who my parents are, but that's for another time and place. I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's go back to the part about the Elite being dangerous to magical people. Magic has a single weakness. This weakness is what the Elite's armor and weapons were made of. They wore gloves encrusted with it. The one thing in the world that can drain magic and make it vanish was diamond, and where I lived, there was an unfortunate abundance of the stuff. If you had a job, it was mining for diamonds. If you were wealthy, it was because you were someone important and so you were paid with diamonds. Diamonds were magic's weakness because they pulled it out and turned it black. That's why my arm had the black handprint. An Elite had grabbed my arm and, even through the fabric, it had turned the magic black. It would fade eventually, in a week, when the magic was replenished through my blood and then the ache would go away. It turned my skin black because there is magic in blood. It's in our hearts. When the diamond touched my skin, the magic inside me turned black, and so my blood where the magic turned dark also turned black because that was how it worked. It was sort of like a magnet. The diamond pulled on it, infected it, then the magic died and vanished permanently. Don't try to understand magic. It's simply not possible. If I say something that doesn't make sense about magic, it's just because magic. One more thing. When the magic inside you is taken away, it drains you. You feel weak and exhausted, as though you've recently missed days of sleep. And it hurts. It hurts a lot. A slight touch of diamond was enough to make me cringe. If it cut you, so I've heard, and the diamond touched your blood . . . Well, I've been told it can kill a person depending on the amount of exposed blood.

Fantastic. I'm going to continue the real story now and give you a break from information. An admittedly short break, but still.

I stayed close to the wall of her house after I closed the door. The Elite would recognize me from a mile away. Sometimes I wondered if they knew more about me than I knew about myself. I kept close to all the houses, praying their shadows would hide me in the darkness. I pressed myself against a building near my own home and didn't move as a group of guards went by. I released a breath as I

made it to my own door, which was always clear of Elite. The guards were forbidden from entering my home because it was more than an ordinary house. I lived in a castle. What I said before about important people, well, my parents and I were those important people. We didn't still have ample diamonds hidden away in a box; the Sovereign had confiscated those after he had taken my mother and father, but there was still the castle. They weren't a king and queen, and I wasn't a prince. My sister wasn't a princess and Rufus wasn't some royal pet or whatever. Mother and Father used to work under the Sovereign as his personal advisors and as his top two Elite. With their magic, he found them extremely useful. The Sovereign had many times inquired after me too, to be his bodyguard from whomever wished him harm. I refused him each time. I saw no reason why I should protect a man as hateful and destructive as he. I never did understand why Mother and Father kept him safe. Anyway, the point is that I wasn't royalty. I was important to the Sovereign because my parents were important to the Sovereign.

Maybe I should back up a bit. The Sovereign had outlawed magic the same day he took my parents. That was no coincidence. They had told me a few days earlier that they'd discovered something which could make magic more . . . Accessible. The Sovereign, being his natural, greedy self, had found out about this. He had sent his guards everywhere to proclaim that whoever had magic should be killed. A lot of people were killed that day. Some of them fought back, and the rest simply gave up and that was that. My parents kept me inside and told me to look after Sophie, so I did. Then, the evening of that same day, the Sovereign came to our house with his Elite and took Mother and Father. I think he found out about whatever they'd discovered about magic, and he wanted that knowledge for himself. He wanted everyone with magic to die so that when he knew what my parents knew, he could kill them and become the only man in the world with magic. Except me. He didn't want to kill me. He knew I didn't know what they knew. He could capture me and perhaps use me as leverage to get whatever he wanted from Mother and Father, but that's not what he wanted either. He wanted me to work for him, to protect him because once he killed my parents, he and I alone would have magic. He wanted the protection I could provide, and he knew that I would be more experienced with my magic than him. I'd be more powerful. That was why he wanted to capture me; so that he could force me to protect him. Fat chance that will ever happen.

There you have it.

I knocked on the massive wooden doors, and Sophie pulled them open to let me in. I bolted, locked, and chained the fifteen locks we had on our door, courtesy of the Sovereign prior to his change of heart. Before my sister could say anything, I went to our fireplace and sat in front of the warm flames. It was never warm outside, and I was always cold. Sophie came to sit beside me.

"What took you so long, Sebastian? I've been stuck here by myself for ages. How come I never get to go out?" she asked.

That was my sister for you. I didn't really blame her. Our parents were gone, and I was always leaving her here alone. I mean, it's not as though she was five or something; she was thirteen years old. Capable of staying safe until I came home. And whenever I came home, she always said that same thing. She was easily bored, but I loved her and protected her anyway because that's what my mother and father had asked me to do.

I hugged her. "Sorry, Sophie. I didn't mean to stay away all day. I would've come sooner, but I had to go somewhere else first. I'm glad you're safe," I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You went to see Julia, didn't you?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

She shook her head. "Why? You told me that she would be in danger if you kept seeing her."

"Jules is in danger because she knows me, and so are you. Going to see her can't put her in more danger than she's already in."

"Sebastian," Sophie began quietly, "one of the Elite came and asked for you."

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to know if you had changed your mind about the Sovereign's offer."

"And?"

"If you were home."

"What did you tell him?"

"Sebastian, I told him you weren't here, and then he left."

I rubbed my arm where they had hit me. Then I stood up and smiled at my sister. "Well, no use worrying about something passed." I took her hand and pulled her to her feet. "I'm here now, so what do you want to do before I go sleep?"

She grinned. "Will you make bracelets with me?"

"Bracelets? Really?"

She folded her arms across her chest. "Yeah, obviously."

"All right. Bracelets."

Sophie left to get her things while I went back to sitting at the fire with my legs crossed. It was true that before the Sovereign took our parents, the house was more . . . I don't know. Filled with sound, I guess. Mother always used to hum when she used magic for whatever she wanted. Well, not whatever she wanted. There were limits. You could feel magic, see it, smell it, taste it, and breathe it. You couldn't use magic to make things appear out of thin air, that would be ridiculous. You could use it to do things. If I wanted to, I could use my magic to heal someone. I would first have to see it (that's the easiest part), then touch it (not hold it, that's impossible), and finally breathe it out. Breathing magic isn't difficult, it's just hard to learn to breathe something that isn't air. Seeing it is easy, as I said before, it appears as a glimmer in the air. Most of the things one did to use magic went hand in hand. If you breathed magic, then you tasted magic, and smelled it, and you would have to see it to use it. So, really, you had to learn all the ways to use magic before you would truly be able to do things with it.

I kind of went off topic again. Sorry. I'll try to stop doing that, but there are no promises.

As I was saying, Mother hummed whenever she used magic, which was often when she was here. Father was always going up and down the stairs to get things he forgot. It never used to be quiet with them there. Now, with only Sophie, Rufus, and me it was as if someone had turned the sound to three, one bar of volume for each of us. I supposed I was getting used to it though.

When my sister came back to the fireplace with her beads and her string, Rufus followed behind her. Rufus loved Sophie. He followed her everywhere. He was gray with fur that hung in layers. His little black eyes were rarely visible. He wasn't big, which was good since his favorite thing to do was sit in Sophie's lap. He wasn't even as tall as her knees. As Sophie sat across from me, he laid himself in her lap contentedly.

She began to open the beads, but stopped when the lid was half open. "I've been thinking of something lately, Sebastian," she said.

"What?"

"If you can use magic, how come you don't use it to make one of these bracelets? Or unlock the door?"

I shrugged. "That's not really how magic works. I mean, I could use it to unlock a door, that would be super easy, but it's unnecessary. And you can't use magic to make things, you use it

to do things, Sophie."

She nodded absently and opened the container but stopped again in the middle of opening another box of beads. She looked up at me. "Why can't I use magic?"

"Well, I guess—"

"You know why, so don't say you guess. You always say that."

"Sophie, I don't think you want to hear the answer."

She rolled her eyes and closed her beads, shoving them away and wrapping her arms around Rufus. "Whatever. Don't tell me."

I sighed and turned to stare aimlessly at the orange fire. The way it moved reminded me of magic. Magic swished through the air, the same as if you blew a dandelion's seeds; it followed the air's flow. Magic flowed where the air flowed. Sometimes it made shapes. I've been told it appears differently for everyone. I think my mother saw it as flower petals. Father saw it as thin strings that joined together and swished about. Of course, it's still that little glimmer in the air, but in the shape of beautiful things. When I saw magic, I saw it as a dove. Not a real dove. Mine was made of flowy magic, almost as though the air currents were colored. She was light pink on her head and down her neck, then it turned to a darkish purply color, and the tips of her tail were dark teal. Then all across her body like clouds were white streams of magic flowing serenely. I had given her a name, even though I knew magic couldn't really be spoken to, but it was a living thing and I liked to think of it as such. I called my magic Alula.

I pulled myself from my thoughts and briefly glanced at my sister; she was still hugging Rufus. "People are born with magic in them, Sophie. In our hearts and it spreads through our blood. Then you learn to see it, at a young age. I first saw it when I was four. After that you learn to touch it. Then smell it and taste it. When you can do all those things, which you've probably learned by the age of ten or twelve, the final thing is to learn how to breathe magic. This takes four or five years. If you can't breathe magic, then you can't use magic. The other things are little pieces of the big picture. Once you learn to breathe it, everything else is easy. Do you understand?"

Sophie stared at me for a moment before speaking. "I understand what you said, but what's any of that got to do with why I don't have magic?"

"I'm getting to that. You weren't born with magic inside you, Sophie. I said all that stuff so you would understand how long it takes to learn magic and maybe you wouldn't be disappointed."

"I am disappointed, Sebastian, but thanks for saying all of that. It does make me less disappointed because now I understand it, at least a little."

I smiled. "Awesome." I gestured to the beads. "Do you still want to make bracelets?"

"No. You need to go sleep anyway."

"As do you, young lady."

She smiled and stood with Rufus in her arms. "I know. Goodnight, Sebastian. I'll see you in the . . ." she paused and sighed. "Tomorrow."

"Goodnight. I'll be here in the afternoon, promise."

She nodded and turned to go upstairs to her bedroom. I turned back to the fire and leaned on the marble around it. I never slept in my bed anymore. It was easier to sleep near the door so I could go out without disturbing Sophie. I also hadn't been sleeping well and I slept in a room beside hers; I didn't want to wake her by accident. So I went to sleep by the dying fire or on the couch at the opposite end of the room. I was too tired to walk over there though. When that Elite had grabbed me was one of the rare occasions when I'd let my guard down. I never let my guard down when I was out, except when I saw Mother and Father. I had never been in the Keep, where the Sovereign stayed and where they were being held, but sometimes I went to the single window of their room and looked in. They never seemed to be hurt, or injured, which always confused me. They weren't even kept in a dungeon. The only evidence I had seen of them being held captive were the diamond bands around their blackened wrists. Besides that, they looked perfectly fine, if a little exhausted. Be that as it may, I stayed where I was by the flames and closed my eyes to rest.

XXX

I opened my eyes before the morning's first light. I ran a hand through my hair to get it into some sort of order and rose to my feet. I glanced briefly at the ashes sitting in the fireplace, then went over to the door and unlatched the millions of locks. I closed it soundlessly behind me, keeping my head down and my gaze lowered. The Elite would know me without being able to see my face, but at least the stupider of the guards wouldn't recognize me right away. Unfortunately for me, there weren't many stupid guards with the Elite. Thus, their title.

I passed about thirty guards on my way to Julia's house. Each of

them glanced at me, some more than once, but they didn't stop me. I suppose they didn't think I was going to do anything I shouldn't be, like I usually was. They knew where Jules lived, so they probably knew that's where I was going. The Elite wouldn't stop me from going there, but if they knew what I intended to do when I left her house, then they'd probably never let me anywhere near her. They weren't really that bright though, or else I'd have been caught at the Keep ages ago. The fact that I'm writing this book should make it pretty clear to you that I'm not in prison.

At any rate, I opened her always-unlocked door and let myself in. I went into the sitting area and found Julia's mother sitting on the couch, reading a thick, old book. I went over to her, and she closed the book with a finger between the pages to mark her place. I didn't sit down, as my stay wouldn't be long and require that kind of comfort, rather I stood a distance from her and asked a question.

"Ma'am, where's Jules?"

"Oh, hello, Sebastian," she replied, a smile on her face. "She's in the kitchen, fixing a cup of tea for me."

"Thank you."

I turned to walk into the kitchen, but she called me back.
"Sebastian, dear, do try and be careful out there, will you?"

I nodded. "I'll try, Mrs. Huffle."

She shrugged and went back to reading her ancient book. I made my way into the kitchen, where Julia would be waiting for me. Her mother had been correct, she was making tea when I leaned on the island. Her back was turned, but she was still beautiful. Her orange curls bounced as she swayed to a tune only she could hear. She was just so . . . Natural. Everything about her was real, and that was a reprieve from everything else because all that felt surreal. It all felt like, well, a fantasy story. Not Jules. She was perfect.

I went over and touched her shoulder. "Hey, Jules."

She was smiling when she looked away from the mug and kissed me. "Hello, Sebastian. I didn't think I'd be seeing you so early."

"I never sleep long, you know. I figured you would be making tea for your mother."

"Of course you did." She placed the spoon she'd been holding on the countertop and turned around to face me. "I love you, and I love seeing you, but you really shouldn't stay much longer. You need to be more careful, Sebastian. Please."

"I know, and I hope you'll forgive me. I won't be coming back for some time after this. I just wanted to see you and tell you in person."

It's not safe for you if I keep coming here. It isn't safe if we keep being . . . The way we're being."

She furrowed her brows. "What does that mean, 'the way we're being?' It's fine if you have to stop coming here. I can come to your place. I understand."

"I don't think you do, love. I can't—we can't—keep doing this. We can't keep being together." I sighed heavily and didn't meet her gaze. "Julia, forgive me, but I don't think we should keep seeing each other."

"You're kidding, right?" She looked sad. "Sebastian, tell me right now that you're not serious."

"I can't say that, Jules. I'd be lying."

She turned away from me. "This can't be the only solution. We can still be together; we just can't see each other for a while. Stay separate. Isn't that easier?"

"I meant to tell you before now, but I couldn't. The Elite, they know. They know I love you." I took her hand in mine. "But if they think I don't love you anymore, then you won't be in any danger. It doesn't matter if we stop seeing each other for a day, or a week, they'll know we're still together. They have to think we've stopped seeing each other forever, Jules. It'll be so much safer for you."

She still wouldn't look at me. "Sebastian, how long have you been thinking about this?" she asked.

"A long time. Since a few days after the Sovereign took them."

"And you've waited until now to tell me?"

"Julia, forgive me. I didn't want it to be this way, but I know you'll be safe. That's what matters to me right now: Your safety."

Julia pulled her hand away and looked at me. There were a few tears that shone in her lovely brown eyes. "Then what about your sister? Are you going to stop being her brother?"

"I don't know."

She sighed. "Okay. Fine."

"Fine what?"

"I think you know the answer to that. You can leave through the backdoor." She briefly closed her eyes. "Goodbye, Sebastian."

I watched her for another moment, wondering if I was an idiot, and then she brushed her tears away and went back to making tea as though I had never been there. I exhaled a heavy breath and walked toward the backdoor. I noticed the sun was only a few hours above the horizon as I walked past a window. Sophie was probably awake now, making bracelets to distract herself. I put my hand on

the cold doorknob, but instead of twisting it to open the door, I glanced back over my shoulder. In stories and shows, it's always something of an accomplishment when you don't look back after ending a relationship or whatever, but I never understood that. Why couldn't you look back at the person you had loved? Well, when I turned back, I didn't see Jules standing there. She was probably bringing tea to her mother. I shook my head and pulled open the door.

"Sebastian, wait."

I did wait. I waited until she stood right beside me. "Yes?"

"You have to look at me," Julia whispered.

I looked at her. She smiled a fragile little smile and put her hand on my cheek. "Don't get yourself killed, okay?" I nodded. She moved her hand to the back of my neck. "Sebastian, you have to promise me."

"I promise."

A tear fell down her face as she pulled me close and kissed me. I brushed the tear away and smiled gently at her. "I love you, Jules." I held her close and kissed her forehead. "Goodbye."

She pulled away from me and walked away to her mother without glancing back. I think I understood it now. I think if Julia had looked back at me, she wouldn't have been able to let me go. Even without her standing there in my arms, I nearly shut the door and walked back to her. Only nearly. I wished that's what I would've done because it's not what I did. I closed the door, but I did it after I left her house. After I had said I wouldn't see her again.

I walked casually across the cobblestone streets, keeping my gaze low and my head down. No one bothered me, which I was grateful for, but something about it was strange. I mean, the Elite didn't stay close to my house, but surely a few of them had seen me leave. Surely, they knew who I was and would be attempting to take me to the Keep any minute now. When I looked around, I didn't see any of the Elite in their fancy, diamond-covered armor.

I decided not to continue worrying about it and walked down the cobbled streets, past the houses that lined each side, and out of town toward the Keep. The Keep wasn't actually far from town, only a few yards away. That's why I went there so frequently. Partly because my parents were there, partly to memorize every inch of the place, and partly because it let me be alone with just my thoughts and my magic. The Sovereign wasn't a man who worried about infiltration or overthrow. He thought he was safe in his castle with his fancy guards and his two captives. He thought he was invincible,

even without magic. I'd heard that he was a bit of a loon and that his hand was never shy of wine. It seemed plenty believable to me. In fact, the few times I'd seen him in person, he had been holding a glass . . . Anyway, the Sovereign didn't keep many of the Elite at his own estate. Most of them were in town, pacing uselessly over the stones. I thought he was naïve and ought to be more cautious. For me, evading the Elite and checking on my parents was as easy as, well, breathing I supposed.

I hid behind a tree when I got closer to the Keep, peering past the trunk to see how many Elite there were. I counted six, three on each side of the double diamond doors. I didn't notice any wandering around to check for intruders, so I pressed my back against the white stone wall that surrounded the Keep. When I'd put several feet between us, I ran from the wall to the building. I caught my breath and went around the corner of the estate to make sure the guards hadn't seen me. It looked like they were as oblivious as ever. Honestly, I could have walked across the yard, and they never would have noticed or cared. At this point, you're probably wondering why I haven't used any magic. There is a reason for that. Being near the diamonds that decorated the exterior of the Keep and the diamonds that adorned the outer wall made my magic a lot weaker. I only used it whenever I had to, and that wasn't right now.

I went around the sparkling Keep until I found the little window where I would be able to see Mother and Father. It was just a little glass pane framed with diamonds. I looked through the glass and immediately noticed the absence of my parents. Their little white room was empty aside from the two Elite who always stood on either side of the door. My warm breath fogged the glass as I leaned nearer to the window. I hadn't ever seen the room without my parents in it. It made me wonder if the Sovereign was going to do something to them. I shivered briefly and pulled away from the window. I huddled close to the wall where no diamonds would touch me and held out my hand, palm up. It took a second before I could see Alula hovering above my hand. She, being made of magic, felt soft and smooth, like velvet. I closed my eyes and breathed in the magic, the warm taste lingering in my mouth. I went back to the glass and let my breath fog it up again, but this time it wasn't just my breath; it was magic too. Magic is perfect for things like this. As I told you before, magic does things. That glimmer in the air, the soft feeling, the warm breath, it could do things like unlock a door. As my breath spread across the glass, the magic also spread across the glass. An

ordinary person, like yourself, would never be able to discern the difference between magic and breath. For me, it was easy. I saw the pale pink and purple and dark teal color of Alula go across the glass. The magic reached the edges of the window and it almost looked as if nothing had changed. That's how it would look to you, but I knew otherwise. I let the rest of my breath out onto my palm and blew the magic away, like blowing away smoke. Then I turned back to the window and made myself comfortable while I waited for one of the guards to leave.

It took much longer than I had anticipated. I sat in the cold for hours, wondering whether one of them would leave. I played with magic while I sat there alone, bouncing it between my fingers and sometimes using its natural warmth for myself. I closed my eyes during this time and I'm pretty certain that I fell asleep for a time because when I opened my eyes and looked through the window, there was only a single guard by the window. I took a deep breath and then I pulled myself through the empty window, thanks to magic, and moved to the side as the remaining Elite swung his sword into the wall where I had been standing.

I pressed myself against the wall, waited until he swung at me again, then dropped to the floor and rolled to the door. I jumped to my feet and kicked the Elite in the stomach. He stumbled backward, but his recovery was quick. When he pointed his sword at me again, I circled behind him and shoved him in the back. I didn't keep my hands on his diamond-covered armor long enough for it to cause real damage, but I did receive several small bruises for my effort. The guard was trying to pull his sword free of the door, in vain, I'm afraid. I went over to the Elite and let the magic float in my hand. I was actually going to use my magic to make him fall asleep, but I paused in the middle of blowing it from my hand toward his helmet. He raised his hands in surrender, you see, and I just couldn't bring myself to make the poor guy fall asleep when he was only trying to do his duty. So I dropped my hand and brushed it against my pants to rid myself of any magic while I watched as he removed his expensive helmet. The guard dropped it on the floor and held his hands up once more.

I was surprised to see that the young man under the helmet was only a little older than myself. His skin was a rich brown, the dark material that hooded him making it seem almost black. Every Elite wore black silky material under their diamond armor to further protect them. Anyway, he removed the hood and his black hair fell

over his eyes in short waves. His eyes were perhaps the most startling feature I had ever seen on another human. They were teal, and they were stupid bright against his dark skin. Again, he couldn't have been more than three years older than me.

He spoke with a strange accent that I hadn't heard before. "You must be Sebastian."

I shrugged. "I must be."

"So . . . Are you going to ask why I surrendered?"

"I mean, I wouldn't call that surrendering, under the circumstances, but sure. Why?"

"I don't have much time to explain before that other guy comes back, so could I maybe pull my sword from the door right quick?"

I wasn't sure how those two things connected, but I stepped back and let him yank the diamond blade from the door, leaving a sizeable hole in its place. The guard kept his massive sword by his side, slightly leaning on it as though this was a perfectly ordinary thing to be doing. I stepped back again and waited for him to explain whatever he was going to explain. I did notice something worth noting, however, as I continually glanced at his sword. His left hand, though gloved with black silk and decorated with diamonds for each knuckle, had only four fingers. His glove was made specially for him, as it also had only four fingers. His smallest finger was missing.

"Look, I can't explain everything now, but I can tell you that I'm not who you think I am. Sebastian, I got myself assigned to your parents on purpose. That's all I can say. I'll tell you more later, when I next see you."

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open. "There will be a later? How do you know that? Where are my mother and father? Who even are you?"

He took my arm with his free hand and led me toward the window. He answered my questions in the order I had asked them. "Yes. I can't tell you that. I can't tell you that either since I don't know. My name is Teagan. Now go."

I pulled away from his grasp and looked over my shoulder at the door. No one was turning the knob, and I didn't hear any footsteps walking toward it. I turned back to the Teagan fellow and glared at him. "I don't need to go. No one is coming. Besides, I'm not going anywhere unless you tell me what the heck is going on."

He sighed, which I couldn't blame him for. "Listen, Sebastian. We'll have time to talk about all this when we see each other again. Right now, you need to leave, or you won't be the only one who's

going to get caught."

I closed my eyes briefly. "Fine. I'll trust you because I think you're telling the truth. I need a small favor though."

Teagan glanced at the door and nodded. "All right. What?"

"Could you maybe make sure no one notices that?" I gestured toward the empty window frame.

"Okay, yeah. No one goes over there anyway." He pushed me toward the window again and put his helmet back on. "You really need to leave now."

I walked over to the hole and started to lift myself through the frame, but paused and looked back at Teagan as he took his place by the door. "Thanks," I said.

He gestured toward the exit. I had just pulled myself outside when I heard the door open and close. I rolled out of view from the Elite and peered into the room despite Teagan's shaking head. Mother and Father were being returned to the room, still wearing the diamond bands. I lingered for a moment and watched Father take a seat in a white chair beside the bookshelf. Mother sat in a chair near him, and she looked like she'd been crying. I sat there in the late afternoon chill and did nothing to help them. I hadn't ever done one single thing to help them. All I'd ever done was sit and look. This time was different. I had already disposed of the window, so what was preventing me from going in that room and getting them out? Nothing. That was a lie. Something did stop me. Something Teagan had said. Besides, it would be useless. Yes, I could use magic, but not to harm others. That meant I wouldn't hurt the other Elite with Teagan, and Teagan would have to act his part, which pretty much ended with me being captured. I loved my parents, but then was not the time for me to be forced into working as the Sovereign's personal bodyguard. They would have to wait a little longer.

I finally turned away from the window and went back around the building, making sure to stay out of the Elites' sight. I followed the wall back to the entrance and left the way I came. I exhaled a slow breath and started home. Part of me wanted to make a stop at Julia's house, but I reminded myself that I had to forget about her. I couldn't allow her to get hurt because of me. I thought of Sophie instead and continued toward my own home.

As I walked farther into town, I began to notice the quiet of the place and the absence of Elite. This bothered me and I moved faster. When I neared my house, I saw a crowd of people and all the guards I had been stressing over. I didn't want to draw attention to myself, so

I walked on the outside of the gathering and found a place where I could see what was happening. Elite were shoving people back into the crowd at sword point. Five of the guards stood in the middle of the gathering with two people who were clearly meant to be prisoners. One Elite held each prisoner firmly by the arm while the other three stood behind them and didn't really do anything. I pushed my way through the people until I could hear what the guards were saying.

"This is your final warning before one of them dies."

I didn't truly know who they were talking to, but I had a pretty good guess. What I wanted to know was who they were holding, so I got as close as I dared. I saw one woman with dark orange hair and tears dripping from her eyes. I couldn't make out any details. She could be anyone. When I turned my attention to the other captive, I drew in a breath. Orange wavy hair, light pink shirt, brown eyes. She wasn't crying, I hadn't expected her to be, but she did look worried. Knowing her rather well, I understood that she wasn't worried for herself; she was worried for her mother and for me.

The Elite who held Julia drew his sword and held it to her neck.
"That's it."

Julia's mother thrashed against the man who held her. "No, please! Don't hurt her! He'll be here, he'll come. Please!"

Julia took a deep breath and closed her eyes as the guard raised his blade. I muttered something I shouldn't have under my breath and shoved everyone out of my way. Most of them recognized me and moved willingly, the few who didn't know me followed others they did know and moved anyway. The Elite blocking the crowd parted for me also and I stepped forward with my hands raised. Mrs. Huffle wouldn't look me in the eyes. Julia opened her eyes and frowned at me. I didn't look directly at either one of them but kept my full attention on the man who meant to kill Julia.

I was certain there was a smirk beneath his helmet. "I'm more than willing to let the girl live in exchange for you."

I nodded. "I know that, but I will only come with you if you let me speak to her first," I replied.

He shrugged and moved his sword away from her. "Fine, as long as you keep your word."

"I always keep my word."

He took a few steps back to allow for some privacy, which I was grateful for. I lowered my hands and knelt beside Julia. She shook her head at me and rolled her eyes. I gave her a sad smile and wiped a

stray tear from her pale cheek.

"Sebastian, what are you doing?" she asked.

"Julia, listen to me. I want you to get Sophie and Rufus and your mother and leave. You have to promise you won't come after me. Will you do that for me?"

"I . . . Why aren't you fighting back? You have magic. You don't have to go with them."

I stood up. "I'm going with them so that you and Sophie will be safe. Julia, will you do as I asked?"

She blinked away a few tears and nodded slowly. "Yes."

I turned away from her. "Thank you. Take your mother home and don't leave the house until it's safe."

I heard scuffling and crying and walking behind me. I felt Jules watching me, staring at my back, but I didn't look at her. I waited until I didn't hear crying and then I raised my hands again and turned toward the Elite. None of them had their swords drawn, which was understandable. Unless I fought back, they wouldn't really need them. They had diamond bands, and they were bigger than I was. Not to mention there were five of them and one of me.

"Get on your knees," an Elite said.

I shook my head. "I said I would give myself up. I didn't say I would be made to kneel."

I felt a sharp pain between my shoulder blades and fell to my hands and knees. The same Elite who had hit me pressed the heel of his boot onto my back and I collapsed under his weight. I felt them slide the diamond bracelets over my hands and onto my wrists. I clenched my teeth and drew in a quick breath as they pulled me to my feet. One of the guards inspected the bands on each of my wrists to ensure they would stay on, then the Elite who'd spoken before stood in front of me with his arms folded across his glittering armor.

"Well, well, well. The Sovereign will be happy to see you, Sebastian. He's been trying to get you to come willingly for some time now, as you know. He gave up on your willingness a bit ago. I must admit, he seemed disappointed in you."

"I guess that's too bad since I'm only going to further disappoint him," I said.

"We'll see." He grabbed my arm and led me toward the Keep, the other Elite following behind us. "I wouldn't do anything rash, if I were in your place."

"It's a good thing you aren't in my place then, or you might not try anything like this."

I elbowed him in the stomach where there were less diamonds to protect him. He dropped my arm and doubled over while I took advantage of the guards' confusion. I ran past them all and, pushing a few out of my way, hid behind someone's house to catch my breath for a moment. I heard the lead Elite shouting at the others to get moving. I heard them come into the town to look for me, but I doubted they would accomplish much. The Elite looked expensive and forceful, but they were terrible at executing anything in an orderly fashion. They did whatever they wanted, however they wanted, and the outcome was always a surprise, especially for them. Every one of the guards ran past my hiding place, none the wiser.

I made myself comfortable against the building and worked on removing the bands. They looked like thick bracelets made of diamond, and they really weren't very secure. I hesitated to pull them off though, due to my susceptibility to diamonds. It wasn't the pain that made me reluctant in case you were wondering. It was that if I removed the bands, it would take time for the magic to come back. If I was quick, my entire hand wouldn't turn black, but it would still drain my magic. I sighed and began to twist the bracelet off my wrist. It was admittedly slow-going, but I wasn't worried. I didn't think anyone would find me here. I managed to pull one of them free without hurting myself too much and started on the other. I was about to pull it free, but I stopped when I heard voices coming toward me. I stayed still and waited until they got closer before I did anything. I rose to my feet and was about to do . . . Something, but I recognized the voices.

I was leaning against the wall with crossed arms when my sister and Jules came around the corner of the house with Rufus behind them. "What are you—" I didn't get to finish because Julia slapped me. I couldn't even be angry with her; I was simply stunned. "What was that for?" I asked as I massaged my jaw.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Figure it out."

I looked at Sophie and she started laughing. I turned back to Julia. "Jules, forgive me. I obviously am an idiot for thinking that would actually work. I was worried about you, that's all. Forgive me?"

She sighed and then noticed my hand and pulled it away from my face. "Sebastian, what happened?"

I hadn't really paid attention to what my hands looked like, as I'd been focused on removing the bands, but now I noticed that they certainly didn't look normal. The hand that still had a band was

bruised dark purple where my palm had touched the diamond, and there were smaller, fading bruises from when I had pushed Teagan. The other hand was bruised, but it wasn't as dark yet because I hadn't finished getting the diamond off. My wrists were both black.

Sophie stood beside Jules and looked disgusted. I looked at them and shook my head. "It's nothing that won't fix itself." I went back to pulling off the bracelet. "Julia, I asked you to leave. What are you doing here and why on Earth did you bring my sister and her dog with you?"

Sophie answered for her. "It's my fault. I told her I wouldn't leave unless you were coming with us. Honestly, you could have at least come to get us after you escaped."

"You shouldn't have come," I said quietly, struggling to slide the diamond circle over my fingers.

Sophie looked hurt and knelt to brush Rufus's hair with her fingers. Julia rolled her eyes at me and knelt beside the small gray dog with my sister. I watched for a minute and sighed when I turned away. I regretted already what I had said to them. I should have known they would come. I should have gone back home like I promised I would. What I really should've done was prevent my parents from being taken. Then none of this would ever have to happen, yet there we were.

I tried twisting the bracelet to get it over my fingers, but that didn't work anymore than pushing did. I pushed it and twisted it, but that didn't work either. Pulling and twisting was just as futile. I blew out a breath and ran my fingers through my hair. Then I glanced at the wall of the house, and at my band, and at the wall again. I knew that diamond was strong, but maybe there was a small chance it would break under brute force. I banged my wrist against the wall, which likely hurt me more than it hurt the bracelet. I intended to continue doing that, but Sophie grabbed my arm.

"Stop being an idiot, Sebastian, and let me help you," she said.

"What do you think you can do that I haven't already tried?"

"Yank it until it comes off, obviously."

I held out my hand and let her pull on the diamond band. She was doing better than I had. I saw it slide over my thumb and then she let go. I slid it off the rest of the way and looked at her blankly.

"Sophie, is everything all right?"

"Look behind you."

I spun around, and my shoulders fell. Standing there behind us were half a dozen Elite. Two of them pushed past me and grabbed the

girls. I held my hands in front of me to show my cooperation. The leader made a gesture with his hand and two more guards came to stand on either side of me and hold each of my arms. No one put the bands back on or tied me up or anything. I thought that was strange.

"This all seems familiar, doesn't it, Sebastian?" The leader drawled. He had a slow and grumbly way of speaking.

"Sure."

"In any case, let's hope it doesn't end the same way. The Sovereign is already displeased with you, and he gave me strict orders that you shouldn't arrive too . . . Confident."

"I thought he was disappointed."

"He's displeasingly disappointed."

"I think you mean disappointedly displeased."

"He also asked that we leave no marks, if such a thing was possible. I think you'll find that it's in your best interest to do as I say with no questions asked."

"Sounds like he asks a lot of you for nothing in return."

He backhanded me and the diamonds on his knuckles stung my cheek. I clenched my teeth and kept my eyes closed until the sting faded. "Okay. You may find this familiar as well. I promise I'll willingly come with you to the Keep if you leave them out of it," I said, gesturing with my head toward Julia and Sophie.

The Elite inspected my face to make sure he hadn't cut me before he answered. "Only one of them can go. I'll let you decide." The guards released me and pushed me toward the girls. "Only one, Sebastian. I'll be right here when you've made up your mind. Oh, and don't waste time. The Sovereign is expecting you tonight."

I turned on my heel and went over to Sophie and Julia. Rufus was still in my sister's arms, whining quietly to himself. Sophie looked scared, shocked really, and I had to turn away from her for a moment. Jules wasn't looking at me, instead she stared at the ground. I went first to my sister and put both my hands on her shoulders.

"Sophie, you have to go home, okay? Stay there and wait for me," I said.

She nodded. "What about Julia?"

I smiled sadly. "I'll make sure she's fine."

Sophie brushed away a tear. "What about you, Sebastian?"

"Stay inside and don't answer for anyone. I'll come get you, I promise."

"You promised you'd be back in the afternoon."

"I know. Forgive me."

She hugged me and went back to comforting Rufus, though I believe he was the one comforting her. I glanced back at the leading Elite, and he waved toward Julia. I went to her and stood there without saying or doing anything. She didn't lift her head and look at me or speak to me. After a moment, I decided it was ridiculous and lifted her chin with my hand. She glared at me.

"Julia, what do you want me to say?" I whispered.

She took a shaky breath. "I want you to say what you're sorry for. I want you to realize that everything you said to me this morning was useless and completely stupid. And besides that, I want you to stop getting yourself captured."

"Do you want to know what I'm most sorry for?" She furrowed her brows and slowly nodded. "That Sophie will be free, and you won't. That I had to make that choice." I leaned nearer to her and kissed her forehead. "I'm also hope you'll forgive me for what I'm about to do."

Her eyes widened. "Don't do anything else moronic. Please, Sebastian. Don't."

I kissed her properly and smiled. "Forgive me, love." I went back to the commanding guard and looked him in the eyes. I mean, where I assumed his eyes were. "If you want to take Julia, then that's fine, but I won't come. If you want us both to come, then I propose an alternative."

"And what is that?"

"You have someone else at the Keep who is important to me. My deal is that you let one of them go, and you can take us both. However, I think you will find that it is much wiser to let both girls go, and only take me. I think the Sovereign would agree." I held out my hands to him. "Me and her for my mother or father alive, or me alone with both parents still in captivity."

He kept his head turned in my direction while I stood there with my hands out, wrist to wrist. Finally, he sighed under his helmet. "Fine. Let the girls go and take the boy."

I nodded at him. "Thank you."

The Elite holding Sophie and Julia let them go and took each of my arms above the elbow. Sophie turned away immediately and ran home with Rufus. Jules looked at me sadly and angrily before walking away. I watched her go and wondered whether I would ever see her again. The Elite pulled me toward the Keep while I still watched her figure become more and more distant. I must have stopped

completely because one of the guards pushed me forward and I nearly fell over, just managing to right myself. I kept my gaze forward after that.

As we walked, I seriously considered using magic to do something, like make myself disappear, but I doubted my bruised hands would do much. At the very least, I could cause myself to fall asleep, though that somehow didn't seem smart. Instead, I let my magic replenish itself as we walked toward the Keep. Magic was not, of course, my only means of escape. I could have easily kicked the two guards behind me in places they likely didn't want to be kicked and run. To tell you the truth, Reader, I was tired of running. I wasn't really that good at it either. Hiding, I could do. Running, not so much. It was just tiring and stressful, and I was sick of being exhausted and anxious all the time. Being captured was honestly a reprieve.

When we walked through the opening in the wall that led toward the Keep, I was surprised when I was made to stand by the wall. I was infinitely thankful that diamonds only adorned the outside of the wall when the two men holding my arms pushed me against it and held me there. The leader of our group ordered everyone but himself and a single Elite to leave us. The Elite left with us walked behind me and hooked his arms through my elbows, pulling my arms tightly behind me. I knew what was coming, and I did not particularly care for it.

The lead Elite stepped closer to me, close enough that I could feel his hot breath through the slits in his helm. "I must apologize for following orders, Sebastian. You understand the Sovereign doesn't want you to be too . . . Sure of yourself. It's nothing personal, really."

"Really? Oh, that's fine, then," I replied.

He shook his head and punched me in the gut. "The Sovereign is expecting your full cooperation, as you promised."

I sucked in a breath. "I never promised to cooperate, only that I would come willingly."

This time he hit me in the shoulder, a lot harder than his first fist. "Try to understand, the Sovereign doesn't want to hurt you. He wants to help you."

I raised a brow. "Did he say that?"

"Something like that, yes. He has faith in you, Sebastian."

"I don't think anything he can offer is worth guarding him."

That elicited another fist into my ribs, which sent my breath away instantly. I couldn't even lean over because of the Elite behind me. He hit my shoulder twice more, then nodded at the man behind

me and I was released. The commander looked at me for a minute as I recovered my breath, then he kicked me and I fell back against the Elite behind me, who caught me under my arms. The commander leaned over me.

"I'm glad we've come to an understanding. I'll take you to speak with the Sovereign," he whispered.

I righted myself and shrugged. "Okay."

If he hadn't been wearing his helmet, I was sure I would have seen his scowl and narrowed eyes. As it was, I had to content myself with following behind him as the Elite followed behind me. The guards at the Keep's entrance nodded at the commander as we entered the opulent building. I didn't gape in awe when I went inside the building because it was exactly how I imagined it would be. The walls were all white, the carpet on the floor was white, the ceiling was white, literally everything was white. And everything sparkled with diamonds. There were diamonds embedded in the walls, laid casually on the carpet (a likely tripping hazard), dangling from the ceiling's light fixtures. Colors were cast everywhere from the crystals that reflected the sun's light. Despite the wariness I felt from seeing so many diamonds, I found it quite comely and, somehow, inviting.

I was led through the hall and into a simple sitting area. I noticed first the glittering fireplace and stark white furnishing before my gaze settled on the Sovereign. I had seen him before, but never dressed as he was now. He wore a white suit, as white as everything else in the Keep, with a black tie and shiny black shoes. He held a glass of red wine in his right hand that he swirled. His hair was white too, but not completely. There were a few streaks of silver in it, and his beard was much more silver than his hair. His round, wire-framed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. As I entered the room behind the commanding Elite, I was a little shocked that he didn't actually seem to have a single diamond on his person. Not even on the knuckles of his black gloves.

The commander waved his hand at the other Elite with us, and he left, leaving me with the commander and the Sovereign. The commander grabbed my arm and nodded respectfully to his elder. I rolled my eyes, but I stayed still while the Elite addressed the Sovereign.

"Sire, Sebastian had a change of heart," he said.

The Sovereign barely glanced at me. "Yes, I can see that. Perhaps you'd like to fetch some more wine for him."

I looked at him. "I hate to sound so rude, but I, uh, don't drink."

The Sovereign turned to me and took a sip of his wine. For a moment, I thought he might be tempted to order my execution. Then he smiled at me, a bit of a crazy smile, and took another sip. "Well, of course you don't. I didn't expect you would." He leaned near to me and whispered conspiratorially. "I said that to get more for myself."

I nodded and leaned away from him. "Right."

The commander cleared his throat. "Sire, if I may, what should I do with him?"

"Why, I asked to see him, didn't I?"

"I . . . Yes, Sire. Whatever you say."

"Then sit him down and have the day off, Commander."

This confused the guard. I smiled despite myself. "Yes, Sire."

He left without offering me a seat, which was just as well. I glanced around at the couches and chairs and failed to notice a single one without diamonds shoved through holes in the cushions. I couldn't imagine they were comfortable to sit on either, so I stayed where I was and waited for the Sovereign to say something.

He took a long drink from his glass and set it on the table beside him. "Sebastian, please, sit anywhere you like."

"I'd rather stand," I told him.

He nodded. "Very well. I think we should discuss the important matters first, yes?"

"I guess."

"Splendid! What do you think the important matters are?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Mother and Father."

"Yes, your parents. You know, they're rather stubborn. Perhaps I'll let you speak with them, get some sense into their heads."

"What do you think are the important matters?" I asked.

He smiled briefly. "There is only one important matter in all of this, Sebastian. It's the reason for everything. The reason your parents are here, the reason you are to be my Elite, and the reason they have to die. I'm rather surprised you have not taken advantage of your invaluable talent."

He wasn't surprised. He knew better than most the way diamonds effected magic. My skin wouldn't change color, however, unless there was contact with the crystals. The amount around me in the Keep prevented me from using an ounce of magic. For now.

I sighed. "I haven't had a change of heart, and I won't protect you against your own people when they rebel. If you want to lock me up with my parents, then be my guest."

"I don't want to be your guest, I want you to be my guest. I'm

not foolish enough to lock you with them anyway. There's already a missing window. Now, you wouldn't have anything to do with that, would you?"

"What if I were to walk out of here?"

"Then I suppose you would walk out of here."

"You wouldn't stop me?"

He sipped his wine and stood up in front of me. He was a lot taller than I recalled. "Sebastian, have I not made myself clear? I'm not going to hurt you. I want to help you. You're confused about what's going on."

"I don't think so."

"No, you wouldn't. We can talk tonight at dinner. I think for now it would be best if you went to your room."

"It's funny that you think I'm going to stay."

He gripped my shoulders and I winced, reminded of the Commander's abuse. "It would neither be wise nor polite to turn away the host's invitation to stay a while, Sebastian. Please, my Elite will escort you to your room." He pushed me toward a few that had been waiting. "I think you'll find that it's been specially designed to accommodate you. I'll send someone for you when it is dinner time."

I glanced at him. "I'm not going to protect you."

He smiled sadly. "Then you might find staying here a little unpleasant."

I turned away from him and allowed the Elite to escort me through the Keep. The three of them led me up a staircase. The rails were coated with the dazzling crystals. In the center of every other step there was a single, large diamond embedded in the wood. To me, it felt over the top. Sure, he had a million diamonds to show off, but no one cared. It did absolutely nothing for him. I think he did it because he thought it made his ability to get what he wanted feel more present, more obvious.

They took me to a white door at the end of the hall that was dearth in its sparkling décor. One of the guards followed me inside the room and stood by the door while I took a brief glance at my temporary room. The first thing I noticed was the total absence of anything that glittered. Every inch of the room was white, nearly glowing, and there was not one single diamond. I vaguely wondered how long the Sovereign had kept this room empty for me. The thought made me shudder.

I glanced at the Elite with me before sitting heavily on the bed, and I caught my breath. With everything that happened, I hadn't

really given any attention to my shoulder or ribs. The instant I sat down, however, the pain in my side made itself noticed. I stood up again and leaned against the wall with my gaze on the Elite.

He finally pulled off his helmet and pushed a hand through his sweaty hair. He didn't turn to me when he spoke. "If you lay down, it might help ease the pain."

I took his advice and lay on my back in the bed. It didn't hurt as much as sitting, but there was still a dull ache. I closed my eyes. "Are they still there?"

He looked at me and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that. Ask me anything else you want to know, and I'll tell you as much as I can."

I blew out a breath. "What I want to know is why you're doing this? Why are you trusting me?"

"I'm like you, Sebastian. I trust what you intend to do."

"How are we alike at all?"

"For starters, I can do what you can."

"And what's that?"

"Magic."

I sat up and winced. "What?"

Teagan nodded. "I was . . . Pitied by the Sovereign. He didn't know I was magical. He just thought I'd been caught in the chaos, and I can't say I discouraged his belief. I lost my parents when his Elite killed all the magical people, but they hid me before they were killed. I let him believe what he wanted, and he welcomed me to the Keep. He saved me, and so I became his Elite in return for his kindness. But he doesn't know about the magic, and he doesn't know that I'll never think that what he did was out of kindness. He did it to gain from my pain."

I didn't know what to say. The man had given me a sob story, and I was honestly at a complete loss for words. I stayed quiet, rather than saying something idiotic, and let him continue.

It was a while before he said anything else. "Look, I want to help you stop him. I can help you out of here, if that's what you need."

I lay back on the pillows and shook my head. "No, thank you. I don't need any . . ." I stopped talking when a sudden thought occurred to me. "There is actually one thing."

I heard him sigh. "Is it in any way important?"

"It is to me."

"Fine. What is it?"

"Will you make sure Jules and my sister are all right?"

Teagan was already shaking his head before I sat up enough to look at him. "I'm sure they're fine, Sebastian. I'm leaving now."

"Wait." His hand hovered over the doorknob. "Teagan, please. I would do it myself, but I'm preoccupied. Just check in on them, I'm begging you. Please."

He pulled open the door without responding and left the room. Only a minute later, he opened the door and rolled his eyes at me before putting his helmet back on. "I'm not making any promises, but I'll see what I can do."

I grinned. "Thank you, Teagan. Truly."

"Whatever."

Then he actually left me alone. I stayed on my bed, not doing anything. The ache was eventually replaced with a soreness, which I preferred. I thought about Julia for a time, wondering whether she had gotten safely away from the Elite. I was confident that Sophie would be safer than her, despite being my little sister. I mean, I loved her, but not in the same way that I loved Jules. I would do anything for either of them, probably including protecting the Sovereign. They and my parents were the Sovereign's only surety that I would do what he wanted, which scared me.

I was staring through the window when I heard a knock at the door. I didn't open the door, but I did tell the guard to come in. I heard him shut the door, heard his steps stop just behind me, then he spoke, and I recognized Teagan's voice. I wondered what he was doing here so soon.

"I couldn't get away, Sebastian. The Sovereign asked me to come up here and escort you down for dinner. He also asked me to give you these."

I turned around and sighed when I saw the crystal bands in Teagan's hands. I took the bracelets from him and slid them over my hands and onto my wrists. The harsh ache reminded me of my bruises immediately, but I don't think Teagan noticed, which was just as well. I let him make sure they weren't going to fall off, and then he turned to me. I knew there was a serious expression on his face from the tone of his voice.

"There is something you should know before you go down. I think he wants it to be a welcome to you, but I can't see you taking it as such. Sebastian, he—"

A fist banged on the door and cut him off. "Hurry up."

Teagan sighed and pulled open the door for me, lightly shoving

me past the threshold to keep up appearances. I glanced back at him, and he shook his head ever so slightly. I waited until he was in front of me, then followed behind him. We walked down the sparkling white hall, down the diamond-embedded steps, and took a turn that led away from the living area where I had previously been. Teagan took me by the arm and steered me into the dining room, where I stopped at the entrance and stared.

I didn't stare because of the massive white table that seemed to be made of a single, huge diamond. I didn't stare at the crystalline light fixtures and chandeliers. I didn't even stare at the white floor which had crushed diamond in the grain of the wood. What caught my immediate attention were the two people seated on the right and left of the Sovereign. One of them was a woman with short, curly brown hair and matching brown eyes. The other was a man, around her age, with the beginnings of a beard and brown hair that was in disarray. They both wore white, a glittery white dress and a white suit not so different from the one the Sovereign adorned. I recognized both of these people, of course, because they were Rebecca and Theodore. They were both magical. They had a daughter, and they had me. Part of me, maybe most, was glad they were there. The other part of me was unsure about all of this, but I mostly ignored that small voice.

Teagan pulled me forward after a minute of my immobility and had me sit at the opposite end of the table from the Sovereign. He left us entirely alone but for the two guards that stood inconspicuously at the door. No one said anything for a long time, rather the Sovereign watched me watch the man and woman. What confused me most of everything was that neither of them would meet my eyes.

"How kind of you to join us for dinner, Sebastian," the Sovereign said, taking a sip of wine. "I thought you weren't going to stay."

I focused my gaze on his mirthless gray eyes. "I'm not staying long, only long enough."

"Of course. I do hope you enjoy your stay while you're here." He set his glass on the table and leaned back in his chair. "Would you like to know what we're having tonight?"

"No. I would like to know what they're doing here."

The Sovereign smiled. "They're here for dinner, the same as you and I. Should I ask them to leave?"

"No, they can stay, but I'm leaving." I stood up and pushed my chair in, my eyes never leaving the man's gaze. "I hope you enjoy

your dinner. Good evening." I turned on my heel and walked out of the room. When I was certain the Sovereign couldn't see me, I stood by the wall and waited for him to come to me. When he finally did come after having an undisclosed conversation with my mother and father, there was the inevitable glass of wine in his right hand and a disappointed expression in his eyes and on his lips.

"What is it you want from me?" I asked of him.

He shrugged a shoulder. "You know the answer to that question already, Sebastian. I think what you meant to ask is what do I want from them."

I clenched my jaw. "Fine, but I know that too."

"You do. Which brings us to the question you really meant to ask."

"Why are they here now?"

"You're not stupid, Sebastian. I think you know why."

He was unbearably right. I did know why they were there. He wanted me to glean the information from them so that I would be all he needed. "What's going to keep you from hurting them?"

"Why would I do that? I told you; I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm trying to get you to join me in my endeavors."

I glanced around the wall and looked at them sitting there, oblivious to their own predicament. It irritated me that the man before me could make them seem incapable so easily. When I turned back to the Sovereign, he was lazily sipping his wine.

I sighed. "Okay. Let me talk to them in my room."

He smiled. "Absolutely."

I walked past him and found the stairs on my own. There weren't any Elite around, so I took the opportunity to push my bracelets over my hands. As I'd already done it once, the second time was more efficient. I saw the door to my room just as I finished taking off the left band. There were no guards at the door, which I was thankful for. I opened it and sat on the bed, massaging my wrists and fingers. I paused and listened for the footsteps that would soon fill the hall but heard nothing.

I held out my open palm and waited a few moments, then I saw a dim flicker of my magic. Alula swayed on my fingertips for a few seconds before she flickered away entirely. I kept my hand open and waited for her to appear again, but it took longer than I would have liked. My magic was still depleted, though my hope was that it would be fully ready to use tomorrow sometime in the late afternoon. I didn't figure I would need a lot of it, but I liked to be prepared.

I closed my palm the second the door opened and stood up. There were three Elite escorting my parents: One for Mother, one for Father, and the last for insurance and added security. I didn't smile when I saw them, mostly because they both hung their heads and would not have acknowledged it. I nodded to the guards, and they shut the door, leaving my parents to stand awkwardly in front of it. I said nothing, rather stared at them for a long time.

Mother's curls were unkempt and limp. I couldn't see the expression in her eyes, but I figured it wasn't ecstasy. Her shoulders were slumped, she was pale, and her hands were black enough to be mistaken for gloves. The sparkling white dress she wore was very out of place. Father hadn't fared much better. His hair was disheveled, his hands like his wife's, and his overall demeanor was not what I remembered of my father. His suit was undoubtedly the same as the Sovereign's, which further bothered me. To tell you the truth, I wasn't even bothered with the Sovereign as much as I was bothered with myself. I had let this happen to them. How many times had I gone to the Keep and left them there? How many times had I watched them through that window and done nothing? I had done nothing until I thought they were in actual danger. I was to blame for their absence at home.

I did finally manage to pull my gaze from them and gesture toward the bed. They shuffled over and sat down without saying anything to me, without even looking at me. I stayed where I was and did not turn back to face them. What I really wanted was for one of them to break the silence, so I stayed quiet and waited patiently.

I don't actually know how long it took before my father said something, and I did not care. I was just glad to hear him speak to me. "What are you doing here?" His voice, at least, was perfectly intact.

"It isn't important why I'm here." I looked at them. "I need you to tell me what you know."

He lifted his head to see me. "What concern is that of yours?" I pulled a chair to the bed and sat down. "What do you mean?" "Why do you want to know?"

"I . . . I don't want to know, but the Sovereign does. He wants to have magic for himself, and he believes that the two of you can help him do that. I want to know so that you both can be free."

Mother looked up then. "That's the only thing keeping us alive."

I shook my head. "No, it's not. I am. I can make sure you leave the Keep. Please."

"You're lying," Father said.

"What? When have I ever lied to you?"

He didn't have an answer for that. I left them on the bed and went to stare out the window. I briefly closed my eyes and ran a hand through my hair. I heard my parents talking quietly behind me, which only furthered my frustration. I went back to them when they grew silent and sat down, not meeting either of their eyes.

"Listen to me, please. I know that you think whatever you know about magic is keeping you alive, but you're wrong. The Sovereign is using both of you because he wants something from me. If you tell me what you know, I can get you home. Sophie is there waiting for you. Please, tell me."

My father looked at me and sighed. "What does he want with you?"

It was then, when he spoke those six words, that I realized something I should have recognized sooner. There was no emotion in either of their voices nor familiarity in their eyes. They were certainly my parents, but something was wrong. The way they spoke was . . . Lifeless, monotone. It was unsettling. It was because of magic. I would recognize magic anywhere.

I stood up again and pulled open the door, and the Elite in the hall grabbed my arms. They shut the door while restraining me, but I pulled away from them anyway. One of them reached for my arm, but I took a step away from him and held my hand open. Alula danced on the air. I blew the magic toward the guards, and they all collapsed into dreamless sleep. I stumbled and dimly wondered what that must have looked like to an ordinary person. I made my way down the stairs and was about to go into the dining area, but there was a guard waiting for me at the bottom of the steps. He gripped my arm and led me to a small, empty room and shut the door. He removed his helmet and wiped a hand across his sweaty forehead, pushing the hair from his eyes as he did so.

"What are you doing?" Teagan asked.

"I was going to see the Sovereign."

"Why?"

"I missed the part where this concerns you at all."

"You've barely been up there ten minutes, Sebastian. He's going to know something is wrong."

"Okay."

"Not okay. What happened?"

"Why do you care so much?"

"I was just . . . Trying to help."

"I can handle it."

"It doesn't seem that way."

I sighed and leaned back against the wall. "I appreciate your help, Teagan, but there are some things that can't be helped."

He nodded and stepped away from the door. "Is this one of those things? Or is it something that you won't accept help for?"

I pulled open the door and watched him replace his helmet. "I'm not answering that."

I left Teagan in that little room and went straight to the dining room where the Sovereign sat in his chair, waiting for me. I noticed a slight surprise in his steady stare when he saw that I was alone, though he hid it well. There was still no food on the table, but perhaps he'd been waiting for me to return. I did not sit down to join him, and instead stood in the entrance of the room and glared at him.

"They aren't going to tell me anything," I said.

"Of course not. I didn't expect they would. You'll speak to them again tomorrow."

"What's wrong with them?"

"It seems they've followed your example and removed their bracelets." He gave me a smile and sipped his wine. "They used magic on themselves. Some sort of magic that prevents them from trusting anyone or giving up anything they believe is vital. Don't worry, my Elite are returning them to their room with a new set of diamond bands. They'll tell you on the morrow."

"It doesn't matter anyway. We're leaving."

"Now?"

"Enjoy your dinner, Sovereign. I'm going to bed."

I spun on my heel and left him sitting there. I didn't go upstairs, however, as I had another favor to ask. I went back to the small room where Teagan had been moments before and found him still standing by the door. He shook his head when he saw me, but he followed me inside and closed the door. I took a breath and gave him a rundown of what I intended to do, and what I wanted him to do.

"Why don't you just tell the Sovereign you want to leave? He did say he would let you," Teagan said.

"Yes, I know. He won't let them leave through the front doors though. That's why it has to be this way, and it has to be tonight because tomorrow, when they tell me whatever it is they know, he'll kill them both. Even if I force him to let them go, his Elite will never

let them make it to town."

"And you think if they escape tonight, it will be any different? It will end with the same outcome."

"Not if no one knows and they leave town. They can take Sophie and Julia with them."

"Sebastian, don't you think this is all a little rash? I mean, you haven't been here a day, and you're already leaving. I don't think you're thinking this through."

"I know. I also know they can't stay here. If you really want to help me, then this is your chance. You're welcome go with them."

He took off his helmet to see me properly and furrowed his eyebrows. "Aren't you going with them?"

I pursed my lips. "I can't. They'll still have whatever they have that he wants, but so will I. If I go with them, I'll only be putting them in more danger. Staying is a safer option for everyone."

"This is stupid."

"Yep."

"And you're stupid to stay."

"Probably."

"He'll just find someone else to use against you."

"For sure."

"Why are you agreeing with me?"

"Uh, because everything you just said is true. Were you expecting me to argue?" He shrugged. "Look, I'm doing it whether you help or not." I pulled open the door to go upstairs, but I paused. I looked over my shoulder at the guard. "Thank you, Teagan."

I went upstairs and closed the door to my room, glad my parents were no longer there with me. I sighed and went over to the window. I could see the lights of town from my view. I could see a few guards by the Keep gates and a couple others roaming the yard. I noticed a few of them slump against the wall as they fell asleep. I was watching one Elite speak to another who had fallen asleep when I saw the gate open. None of the Elite seemed to notice, even as it was closed. A figure snuck across the wall, bathed in shadow. I leaned nearer to the window and looked closer, but I could neither tell who they were nor what they were doing. Whoever it was, they made it to the doors of the Keep before the guards seized them and dragged them inside.

I didn't hear them downstairs, but that was fine. I didn't have the time to see who it was. I pulled the curtains over the windows and sat on the edge of my mattress. I bounced Alula between my

hands and rolled the magic across my fingers like a coin. I eventually grew bored of magic and flopped back on my bed. I closed my eyes for a time and waited until everything was silent. I could barely hear muffled voices from down the stairs, walking, and I could hear the guards outside my door. When the voices quieted, I went to the bedroom door and heard two synchronized gasps of surprise. The Elite didn't have time to yell or alert anyone, which was precisely what I had hoped for.

I pulled open the door and found Teagan leaning the sleeping guards against the wall. He wasn't wearing his Elite armor, as the diamonds prevented him from using magic. Instead, he wore a black shirt and jeans. This made sense, obviously, to someone who knows about magic like I do. With all the diamonds on his Elite attire his magic would be way too weak to produce anything more than a wisp of glittering air that most people would miss. I wondered briefly whether the Elite had seen enough of him to recognize who he was when they woke up. I didn't need to worry about that right then, so I nodded at him and went down the stairs.

I hadn't really expected to see anyone around because it was night, but it still surprised me not to see so many of the Sovereign's guards wandering around the place. I went into the living room and found the hall that would lead me directly to the room where my parents were being kept. I honestly did not know for sure if my mother and father would be down the hall, but it was certainly worth a shot. I turned right and followed the path of diamonds until I came to a solid white door at the end. I held my hand up and snapped over my open palm to make a little flame that hovered above my hand, then I placed my hand on the knob and pulled it open.

My parents were in there exactly as I had thought they would be. They stood as I entered and shut the door behind me, locking any Elite out. I knew Teagan only had so much time before someone found him and asked what had happened, and to keep his cover, he would have no choice except to answer them with the truth. I tried not to think about that as I went to my mother and father.

None of us said anything for a time, which I guess wasn't a wise decision since I was hoping we wouldn't get caught, but I didn't know what to say. It didn't seem like I should just say, "Hey, guys. I'm here for that information you have about magic and then I'm going to get you out of here. How's life been?" I mean, it wasn't really the time for that. Instead, I briefly embraced both of them and said something else a little less straight-forward.

"I . . . Forgive me," I mumbled.

Father shook his head. "You've done nothing wrong. I'm just glad you're okay." Mother nodded her agreement.

"You're not angry that I didn't come sooner?"

"Of course not. If we had any reason to be upset with you it would be because you left your sister alone and you thought coming here was a good idea," Father replied in a displeased tone.

I sighed. "And I apologize, but I can't just leave you here. Sophie needs you and I need to know that both of you are safe."

Mother crossed her arms. "And how do you intend to do that?"

"I need you to tell me what you know. Please."

My parents shared an uneasy glance. "Sebastian, we can't do that."

"Why not?"

"If he knew what it took to get magic, not only would we be in danger, but you would also be in more danger than you already put yourself in. For your own safety, we can't tell you."

"Look, the guards will be barging through that door any minute now, and I need you to please tell me what I need to know before they get in here so that you can leave."

Father crossed his arms. "Then let's go because we're not going to tell you. It isn't worth it, son. You'll have to trust me."

I let my shoulders fall when I heard steps coming down the hall. "All right. Let's go."

They nodded and followed me to the window that for some reason the Sovereign had not at least covered up. The plan was simple: Climb through the window after my parents to make sure they made it past the wall, then turn back and go to my own room. Only one thing had gone wrong thus far. Father and Mother were apparently unwilling to tell me what they knew about magic, which was certainly not what I had anticipated. I was hoping that I would be able to persuade them to tell me once they were safe.

When I heard the Elite bang on the door repeatedly, I told my father to climb through the window. He did as I asked with only a slight hesitation and confused expression. Mother followed after him just as the Elite threw the door open. Naturally, all of their swords were drawn and pointed at me, though I was fairly positive the Sovereign wouldn't appreciate it if he injured me. Then again, perhaps helping my parents escape had changed his mind about that. At any rate, I went after my parents just as an Elite swung his diamond-encrusted blade in my direction.

I climbed out the window and found Mother and Father waiting for me by the wall. Thankfully, I saw no Elite outside the Keep. I glanced over my shoulder to see the Elite arguing about something in the room, then I pushed my parents ahead of me and pointed toward the wall. We ran toward it as quickly as we could, but they seemed to be a good distance ahead of me. I chased after them, pleading with my legs to continue, but they didn't listen. I collapsed to my knees and caught myself with my hands. With the adrenaline coursing through me, I had not realized that I was hurt. The pain washed over me, and my breath caught as my magic drained from my body. I felt the searing sting across my back and pushed myself to my knees right as my father ran toward me, leaving Mother by the wall.

He took me by the shoulders and kept me upright. There was genuine concern in his eyes when I met his gaze. "Sebastian, is something wrong? We need to go."

I shook my head. "Father, please. Tell me what you know about magic." I winced. "Please."

"I . . . I . . ." He sighed heavily. "You just give part of your magic to someone and then you're both magical until the other person's magic runs out. That's what we discovered. Are you happy? Can we go now?"

"I can't go with you and Mother. I promise to come and find you, but not now. You need to get Sophie and leave. Please, Father. Go," I muttered.

He didn't. "You can't stay here. You don't know what the Sovereign is really like. I can carry you." He stood and pulled me to my feet, but I stumbled and arched my back.

"I'll follow you. Just go to Mother. Please," I breathed, slumping back to my hands and knees.

It was then that my father saw the injury and drew in a sharp breath. He knelt beside me and placed his hands on my back. I cried out and scrambled away from the harsh sting of his fingers. When he came near me again, I noticed his eyes had tears in them. He put his hand on my cheek and held it there.

"Go, please. I promise I'll come. Father, be careful," I whispered.

He smiled sadly at me then turned on his heel as he rose and ran straight to Mother. I watched them run away from the Keep toward the town, then they were out of my sight.

I released a choked breath as a wave of agony rolled over me. I got on all fours and began to crawl to the wall. I could hear the guards racing in my direction, calling my name. I didn't care anymore.

My magic was draining with every drop of blood that stained the grass. I finally collapsed in front of the wall, lying still on my stomach. The last thing I heard were the guards scouring the grounds of the Keep, but the last things I saw were an Elite and a figure with orange hair. After that, I only knew darkness.

XXX

I opened my eyes and groaned, staring up until the ceiling stopped spinning. I took a couple of deep breaths, then bit back a scream as I sat up to see a familiar bedroom: White everything without a single diamond. I was in my room at the Keep, and as I looked slowly around, I noticed that I was not alone. A man with white hair, a white suit, and white shoes stood by the only large window in the room, to the right of the bed and at once visible when you opened the door. I recognized the man, though he was turned away from me, as the Sovereign. He faced my direction when a gasp escaped my lips as I lay down.

He glared at me and sat at the edge of the mattress. "How do you feel, Sebastian?"

I didn't feel great. "Tired, weak, injured," I mumbled.

"Mmm. I would imagine so. Do you know how I feel?"

"Do I want to know?"

"Doubtful, but I'm going to tell you anyway. I'm disappointed in you, Sebastian. I hoped you would change your mind, but I suppose you were more foolish than I wanted to believe. I'm truly sorry. I really am."

I pushed myself up again and felt the scab crack. I caught my breath before I spoke. "You must know that I was always going to let my parents go. After all, I think that's what you wanted me to do. I even know what they know, so you won't need them anymore." I took a breath and felt a stream of blood slither down my back, ruining the Sovereign's pristine sheets. "Why are you sorry?"

"Well, your parents and you are the only magical people, but your parents are gone and that cut in your back looks . . ." He shuddered. ". . . Awful. You certainly can't heal yourself, so I'm sorry you're going to have to give up the name of your friend. I know one of my Elite has been aiding you. I also know that he or she has magic. How they weren't killed, I don't know, and I don't care. I just need you to tell me who it is so that they can heal you and then they can be locked away." He smiled at me.

I scooted to the edge of the bed and dangled my legs over the

floor, holding my head in my hands. If I told him about Teagan, there was no question the Elite would die. After all the help he had given me, was I really just going to toss him away? I couldn't.

"I didn't know his name," I said quietly.

The Sovereign raised a brow. "Fine. What did he look like?"

I shrugged, wincing from the brief flicker of pain. "I never saw him without his helmet on."

The man beside me stood up and stared out the window. "Then what do you know?"

"I know he's an Elite."

He'd had it with me. The Sovereign took me by the arm and threw me against the wall. I cried out and crumpled to the floor, feeling the whole scab break open. The Sovereign pressed his shiny boot on my chest and scowled at me darkly.

"I suggest you give me his name or that wound will be the least of your worries. I might even give you a present that I had made special for you." He leaned nearer, putting more pressure on my chest and pressing my back harder onto the wood floor. "What do you say, Sebastian? The name and the secret of magic for a special gift."

I sucked in enough breath to speak. "I'll give you the name, but not the secret and I won't be your Elite."

"Then I'll make sure whatever your friend does to heal you doesn't last long. You don't know how persuasive I can be, but rest assured, you'll soon find out." He lifted his foot and dusted off his pants theatrically. "Good evening, Sebastian. I suggest you rest."

"Wait," I gasped. "Don't you want to know the name of the traitor Elite?"

He shrugged and opened the door. "Tomorrow."

I closed my eyes. "His name is Teagan."

The Sovereign paused just before he shut the door. "That better be the truth."

I pushed myself from the floor and leaned against the wall, hanging my head between my knees. "That's his name. He knows how to use magic, he told me."

"You sure didn't hesitate to give him up, Sebastian."

I heard the door close, and I took a moment to catch my breath. The Sovereign was absolutely right. I had just condemned Teagan, who'd been my friend the moment I arrived here, to life in prison. I didn't know what the Sovereign would do to him, but I hoped it was nothing awful. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if Teagan was killed because of my abysmal self. A real friend I was, turning him

over just like that.

I sighed and forced myself to my feet, staggering over to the bed and wincing as I sat down. I was mildly surprised the Sovereign hadn't put guards in my room or locked the door or anything. I supposed he thought I was too feeble to try and escape, and he wasn't wrong in thinking that. I was weak and magicless until my back was healed, but that didn't mean leaving was an impossibility. It was a choice, and I wouldn't choose to leave. There were still things at the Keep that concerned me, and I wasn't going anywhere until I had done everything I had come to do. Freeing Mother and Father had been the only reason, until Teagan came into the picture. I would not sit idly by while he was thrown in a dungeon somewhere to rot. I would never be able to live with myself. Aside from that, there was the Sovereign that had to be dealt with. I was never going to give him magic, no matter what he did to me, but I needed to figure something out before he figured it out himself.

I shook my head after a time and lay down on the bed, my back aching and making it difficult to fall asleep. As I lay there restlessly, I thought about Sophie and Julia. I wondered if Mother and Father would have gotten home and left with my sister by now. I hoped they had because if anything happened to Sophie, I would be to blame. It would be my fault for leaving her and I would never forgive myself for that. I halfheartedly hoped they would take Jules with them as well, though I had failed to mention her. I prayed that they would all stay safe, even as I wondered whether such a thing was possible.

I eventually gave up on sleep completely and went to sit on the windowsill and stare out into the darkness pointlessly. I could have opened the window at that moment and left the Keep. I could have climbed down and run back to town, but I didn't. Yes, it would make my life so much easier. Yes, I would be with the people I loved more than anything. Yes, we could all find somewhere safe, but the Sovereign would never stop looking for me. He would never stop sending Elite to capture me. He would make everyone in town miserable because I had left. My heart would never be at rest, and I would never stop glancing over my shoulder, searching for the Elite, for the Sovereign. The anticipation and anxiety alone would make me crazy. I was sure that if I left, I would inevitably end up turning myself over to the Sovereign only so I would finally know he wasn't chasing me.

I think I must have fallen asleep on the windowsill because when I heard the door open, it startled me, and I fell to the ground. I

winced as I used the bed to pull myself up, then I recognized someone familiar standing at the door. He looked exactly as he had the last time I'd seen him, except for the bruises on his face and slight limp as he came over to me. I blew out a slow breath when he took my arm and led me toward the door, relying on his steady arm more than I would have liked.

I stopped him when we stood at the top of the stairs after making certain that there were no Elite around. "Teagan, forgive me. I didn't want to tell him about you, honestly. But—"

He scowled. "But nothing. He didn't force it out of you. He probably didn't do anything to you. It's all right though. I always knew you would tell him about me one day." He turned away and started down the stairs.

"That's not true. You don't understand everything that's happening. If you did, then you wouldn't even be alive right now. I'm trying to keep you alive, Teagan, not get you killed."

"You're doing a pretty sucky job then."

I decided not to argue with him further and followed him down the steps. I kept my hand on the wall, despite the diamonds which decorated every inch of it, and managed to make it more than halfway down before my back simply wouldn't hold me up. My legs crumpled beneath me, and I tumbled down the remaining stairs, landing hard on my back at the bottom. I lay there until I recovered my breath and pushed myself up enough to lean against the wall.

With a dull expression on his face, Teagan crouched beside me and sighed deeply. "Why did I ever agree to help you stop the Sovereign?" he muttered as he pulled me to my feet.

I winced, and he had to wrap my arm around his shoulders to keep me on my feet. As he was a good bit taller than me, it grew uncomfortable after several steps, but I decided it was in my best interest not to complain. He hated me enough as it was, and I didn't want him to drop me on the floor and leave a real Elite to take me to the Sovereign. That was something I definitely did not want to participate in.

We made it to the room I had first been in when I arrived at the Keep. The Sovereign was sitting there on the couch with his usual glass of wine and his usual smug expression. Teagan brought me to stand in front of the man, then an Elite escorted him away. I glared at the Sovereign, but he only twirled the red liquid in his glass and avoided my gaze.

"Sebastian, I've changed my mind about something."

I raised a brow. "Have you?"

"Yes. I've decided I don't need magic so long as I have someone with magic, someone who is talented with magic, as my personal guard. Of course, we've talked about this briefly before, but I have an offer to make you." He took a sip of wine and raised his eyes to meet mine. "If you will agree to be my Elite, then I will never inquire after whatever your parents told you. That is my compromise."

I crossed my arms. "What if I say no?"

"Then I will get the information from you." He stood and looked down at me. "Not only that, but you will beg me to let you be my Elite if you don't accept my offer now. I'm trying to be a good host, Sebastian. You're making that extremely difficult with your hateful attitude."

"Why don't you get Teagan to be your Elite? Why me?"

"Teagan isn't deserving as you are. Your parents served me well, and I expect you would serve me just as loyally. Teagan, however, would betray me the moment I gave him a chance."

"If I agree to be your Elite, what will that require of me?"

"It would require anything I ask of you without a second thought. If I ask you to find someone and bring that person to me, then you do it. If I ask you to stay by my side without leaving, that's what you do. If I ask you to lead my Elite in battle, then I expect you to cooperate fully."

I steadied myself against a brief wave of dizziness. "If you ask me to kill someone?"

The Sovereign took another drink of wine. "Well, I'd want you to kill them, Sebastian. What do you say?"

I stepped back. "I won't protect you and I won't kill for you. If you want protection so desperately, then I suggest you get one of your Elite to do it because I won't. I'm not telling you anything about magic and I'll never be your Elite."

The Sovereign finished his glass and gestured to two guards at the entrance of the room. They each took one of my arms and pulled them behind me, pinching my back and making me grimace. The Sovereign stepped in front of me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry that's your decision, Sebastian. I really was looking forward to giving you a gift, but if you want to be stubborn, I suppose it'll have to wait."

I turned away from him and the Elite took me down the hall where my parents had been kept. We went into a dark room that appeared to be, at first, entirely empty. When one of the guards

flicked the light on, it became dreadfully clear to me why we were in that particular room. One light that shone through a diamond shined directly onto the only piece of furniture there was: A diamond chair. The chair was in the center of a floor covered with the glittering jewels. The walls and ceiling sparkled with diamonds as well, and all I did as they dragged me to the chair was sigh. As they chained my wrists together behind the back of the chair with diamond chains and as they did the same to my ankles to prevent any attempt at escape, I didn't have it in me to resist. Even when the Elite left me there alone, all I did was hang my head and let my shoulders fall.

The diamond light that shone on my back sucked any energy that remained in my body away. The diamonds in the room pulled what little magic still thrived inside my heart right out. My head hurt from the magic of the jewels and my whole body ached. The chains around my wrists and ankles bit harshly into my skin and I could feel their tightness pinching my flesh. The whole ordeal was awful. It drained, quite literally, the life out of me as I sat there silently and let it happen.

I know what you're thinking. Why didn't I fight back? Why did I just let them do that to me? Well, there's a simple answer. I had to. The Sovereign needed not only to think but to believe that he had beaten me. If he believed that, then it would make beating him that much easier. He wouldn't think I had it in me to resist, to turn against him, and that would be his ultimate downfall. At least, I hoped it would work that way.

During my time in that room, I slept only once and was fed only once. The Elite gave me water twice and then offered only a little glass of wine. I'd never had wine before, and I declined it until it was forced down my throat. They did that three times before finally letting me drink water. There was one problem though. I gagged out all the wine and water they'd given me and grew ill. When the Elite left me that day, I shivered despite the cold sweat that I was covered in. I wasn't sick only due to the wine, though that had been a large contributor. I was sick because they'd given me little to eat, made me drink wine on an empty stomach, and locked me in a room made of diamonds. It was my belief that wine and diamonds were a terrible combination for my health.

A short time after they realized I was ill, the Sovereign himself came into the room and looked me over. He looked at my back, inspected my face, and exhaled a long breath. When he knelt to unlock my chains, I was taken by surprise.

"Really, Sebastian. I leave you in here for five days and you make yourself sick." He finished with my ankles and moved behind the chair. "Nonetheless, I can't have you dying just yet."

I felt the chains on my wrists fall off and I breathed a sigh of relief, pulling my arms around myself and ignoring the sting in my back. The injury had closed and healed a little by now, but the diamonds did nothing to ease the ache or sting.

The Sovereign stood in front of me now and actually managed to look concerned for my well-being. "Stand up. I'll take you to your room."

I shivered and pushed myself out of the chair, tightening my arms and trying to instill warmth inside my body. My efforts failed miserably as another shiver ran down my spine. I glanced at the Sovereign and waited for him to say something.

"You look pathetic," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "I wonder why," I muttered.

"Come on. I have important things to do."

I shuffled after him as he began walking from the room. When he made it all the way down the long hall and to the staircase, my legs were tired, and I didn't even think I would be able to crawl up the steps if he asked me to. Thankfully, he didn't. The sovereign glanced back at me, frowned irritably, and took my arm to support most of my weight as we went up the stairs. When we made it to my room, I collapsed on the bed and pulled the blanket around myself, still shivering from my fever.

The Sovereign shook his head at me. "Have you changed your mind yet?"

I scowled at him. "No."

He examined his fingernails. "Fine. I'll talk to you again tomorrow, after you've had time to think things over somewhere less harmful."

I did not satisfy him with an answer as he turned on his heel, leaving through the open door. I heard him lock the door this time as I slumped back in the bed. I wondered if he really thought I would be able to think anything over in my state of mind. The only things I thought about were sleep and sleep. I was so exhausted after not sleeping for that long, all I wanted then was to rest. Only, I couldn't fall asleep. No matter how much I tossed and turned, no matter how many times I shifted positions, sleep evaded me. My fever rose during the night, so I sank into the blankets and still shivered. Every position I lay in made my back ache worse, so I eventually sat up and

leaned against the headboard with my knees pulled close. Later in the night, when I woke from a few minutes of rest, I found a bathroom and emptied my already empty stomach. Instead of sleeping when I returned to my room, I passed out before I made it back to the bed.

When I came to, I was back in the bed with a fever slightly less intense than the previous night. At the least, walking didn't feel impossibly shaky. When the Sovereign came in, his arms were folded over his chest, and he looked furious with me. It seemed like he blamed me for getting sick when, as a point of fact, it was wholly his doing.

"I'm losing my patience with you, Sebastian."

I shrugged. "The feeling is mutual," I muttered.

"Stand up and look at me when you speak."

Sighing heavily, I uncovered myself and climbed out of the bed. Walking was easier than it had been before, but it still made me dizzy and light-headed. When I was standing in front of the Sovereign, he glared at me again.

"I can have Teagan come up here and heal you, Sebastian. Wouldn't that be nice?" I didn't give him the satisfaction of nodding. "In any case, I won't do that unless you agree to be my Elite or to give me the information. You don't even have to agree to both. Just say you'll be my Elite and your misery will be over." He looked me over. "Your back looks worse than it did before, and your fever is only worsening. Do you know that one of my guards found you on the floor last night?"

"You say that like I should care or something."

His face twisted in rage, and he backhanded me. It was hard enough that I stumbled backward and tasted blood in my mouth. "You should care about everything I say! I am the only thing keeping you alive! At this point, you're lucky that I haven't killed you!" He took a moment to compose himself. "If you don't agree to one of my terms right now, I will do something to force it from your mouth."

I shook my head. "I won't be your Elite."

"Then tell me the secret of magic."

"No. I can't do that either. I'm thinking of leaving soon, actually. What do you think?"

He kicked me, and I crumpled to my knees. "I think you're going to reconsider in a moment."

I rose unsteadily to my feet and watched him open the door. Two Elite entered my room, followed by two more behind them. The

two in the back held someone between them, someone whom I recognized instantly. Her hair was messy, and her hands were chained together, but she didn't appear to be hurt. I thought I'd imagined the orange-haired girl after my back was hurt, but there she was.

Looking at her dark outfit, I realized that she must also be the figure I watched the Elite capture. She had come there to save me, and now I was the only thing that would save her. Julia grew still when one of the free Elite put his blade against her throat.

I turned away from her and found the Sovereign beside one of his guards, smiling at me. "I'll let her go if you give me an answer."

"I'm not saying yes to anything you've asked me."

"Is that so? Then I guess I'll kill her."

The blade pressed harder against her skin. I closed my eyes and my shoulders fell. Before I said anything, however, Julia opened her mouth to speak. "Sebastian, no. You can't just say yes because of me. That's idiotic. Please."

"I'll be your Elite. Let her go and I will do anything you ask," I whispered.

The Sovereign waved everyone from the room as Julia screamed at me to change my mind. I was just thinking I had made a horrible mistake when I lost my breath. The Sovereign pulled his fist away and gripped my shoulder painfully, keeping me on my feet.

"I need you to swear it, Sebastian. Promise me right now that you will be my Elite, that you will do anything I ask, and you can talk to her. I'll send Teagan up to heal you."

"I promise. I'll do what you ask of me, and I won't betray you. You have my word," I breathed.

He patted my shoulder and nodded to himself. "I hope, for your sake, that's true."

I sank to floor the moment he let go and leaned heavily against the bed, my head between my knees. I stayed that way for close to an hour before I heard the door open again. I didn't raise my head, but I heard stern voices speaking to someone. I pulled in a deep breath, wincing at the pain in my chest and everywhere in my body. Someone knelt beside me and placed a careful hand on my arm. It was then that I looked up at Julia and forced a tired smile to my lips.

"You look awful, Sebastian. What happened to you?" she asked.

"It isn't as bad as it looks," I murmured.

She rolled her eyes. "I think it's worse than it looks." She paused for a minute, staring out the window. "Why did you say that?"

I furrowed my brows. "Say what?"

"That you would be his Elite."

Oh. "Don't you think the answer to that is obvious?" She shook her head. "I couldn't stand there and let him kill you."

"You could have fought back."

"No, I couldn't have. I don't have my magic right now. Why do you think the Sovereign has kept me this way?"

"So you wouldn't be able to use magic against him."

I nodded. "I had to say I would be his Elite. It was the only way."

"No, Sebastian. You could have stopped him. I've heard him talk about whatever it is you know about magic. At some point, he'll want to know that, too. You could have just as easily told him what you know."

"I couldn't have, Jules. You don't know what he would do if he ever got magic. With me as his Elite, things are so much better. I need you to trust me."

"How can I trust you when you never tell me anything?"

I sighed and hung my head between my knees again. "I don't tell you things so there's no way the Sovereign can hurt you so that he can get that information."

Julia put her hand on my back, and I winced. "Sebastian, he's hurting you to get the information."

"I know. I know what's at risk, and it's better if my life is the only one in danger of being taken."

"That's not true! It's better if none of our lives are in danger of being taken! How can you think so little of your own life?"

"I think little of it because I only have little of it. The moment I agreed to be the Sovereign's Elite, I gave my life away to him."

"Then you should have thought of something better to do!"

"I did the only thing I could think of, and it saved your life! If you want to be angry and hate me for that, then go ahead! I didn't ask for any of this, I never wanted to be a part of this, but I am now and I'm doing what I think is the right thing to do." Julia grew quiet after that, and I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes. "Julia, forgive me. I didn't know what else to do. I'm so sorry."

"I've never heard you say you're sorry before."

"Then let it mean that much more."

She closed her eyes and sighed, brushing away the tears. "Okay."

I lightly kissed her and rose to my feet, a hand on the mattress for support. I stumbled as I walked slowly around the bed, my free hand pressed against my side. Jules came to help me, and I climbed onto the bed and lay there, feeling like I might finally be able to rest

when the door opened a second time. Teagan stumbled into my room and looked back and forth between Julia and me. Julia was sitting on the windowsill, staring at the floor. I was in the bed, shivering and probably looking pale and thin and sick. That was the way I felt, anyway.

Teagan swiped a hand down his face and looked over at me. "When they told me to heal you, I didn't know I was agreeing to this." He gestured in my direction. "I don't even know how you get yourself into these situations. It's ridiculous."

I winced as I sat up. "It really isn't as bad as it looks."

He raised a brow. "I'm pretty sure it's worse than it looks, and that's saying something. You look terrible."

I groaned. "Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"It's true," Jules muttered.

Teagan came to stand on my side of the bed and asked me to turn my back toward him. I figured from his original angle, he hadn't been able to see the injury. Now that he could, I heard his audible intake of breath followed shortly by Julia's. "Sebastian, what happened?"

"Is it really that bad?"

"However bad you think it is, it's three times worse."

"One of the Elite did that with his sword while I was helping Mother and Father escape."

"No wonder it's black."

Teagan tore the hole in my shirt wider and placed both his hands against my skin. The instant he did, I cringed and arched my back. His hands were freezing, and I was already cold enough without them touching me. Not only that, but it hurt. The slightest touch made me wince and he had both hands fully over the injury. I took a deep breath and tried not to turn around and shove him away. After a minute, the pain lessened, and my shoulders fell in relief. The warmth of his magic was beginning to heal me. Well, it was beginning to heal my back. Teagan wouldn't be able to do everything at once, though the warmth did chase away the worst of my chills.

"So . . ." Julia said somewhere behind me. "Who's this?"

It was clear she meant Teagan. I introduced them. "Jules, that's Teagan. Teagan, Julia."

There was another moment of quiet. "You didn't ever say what happened to you," Teagan muttered.

"I don't want to talk about that right now," I said tiredly, dropping my head in hands with closed eyes. I was so tired.

I felt Teagan remove his hands, which also removed any warmth I'd felt, and the shivers returned. I stayed the way I was though, too exhausted to care that I was cold. Teagan put a hand on my shoulder.

"Sebastian, I'm not done yet. I need you to lay on your back."

I shivered and did as he asked, pulling the blanket around myself. Without my back hurting, I might have actually fallen asleep. I could have if Teagan would quit shaking my shoulder.

"What?" I muttered.

"I think your ribs are broken. And you have a fever." He uncovered me and shook his head. "I can't heal you if you're wrapped in a blanket."

I pulled my arms around myself. "Then don't heal me."

"Too bad. The Sovereign ordered me to." He looked me over and frowned. I noticed Jules was frowning at me as well. "Sebastian, when was the last time you slept?"

I pushed a hand through my hair and pulled in a breath. "I don't know. I lost track."

Teagan snorted. "I'm serious."

"I know. I was too. I don't know."

"How can you not know?" Julia asked.

I sighed and rubbed my face. "Look, I just don't know. It was a while ago. A few days. Why does it matter?"

"That's why you're not getting well. Why did you stay up?" Teagan asked.

I scowled at him. "I didn't stay up. I couldn't sleep, not where I was. It was horrible."

Julia stood beside the bed. "Isn't there a way to make people fall asleep with magic?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Then just ask Teagan to do it. Can't he heal you while you're asleep?" she said.

Teagan shrugged. "Sure. You want me to do it?"

"There's something you both should know first."

I told them what they needed to hear and asked them to trust me. It took a minute to persuade Teagan, but he did eventually agree. I closed my eyes and nodded to him to use his magic. He held up open hand to his mouth and blew the magic right into my face. It was pretty amazing how quickly everything around me turned black, and I relaxed into rest at last.

XXX

When my eyes opened, it took me a moment to remember where I was. As I stared at the white ceiling, I noticed something incredible. I didn't hurt anymore. I wasn't exhausted, I wasn't in pain, and I didn't feel like throwing up. Whatever Teagan had done had worked a miracle. I sat up, intending to thank him, but no one was there with me. Even Jules had left. I supposed the Sovereign had let her go, but I was still disappointed that she hadn't told me goodbye.

I blew out a breath and climbed out of the bed, pulling open the door and finding the staircase. I walked into the sitting area and found the man I'd been hoping to see. He smiled in greeting when he noticed me and took a sip of wine.

"Good of you to join me. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Did you send Julia home?"

The Sovereign set his glass down. "Of course. I'm a man of my word, Sebastian."

His accusation could not have been more obvious. "I said I would be your Elite, and I will." I took a breath. "What do you want me to do?"

He raised a brow. "You're really going to be my Elite?"

"Will you really leave my family be if I say yes?" I asked.

"I will."

I nodded. "Then yes, I am your Elite."

"Wonderful, though it isn't that simple. Not for you." The Sovereign stood up and came before me. "Show me your magic, boy."

I held up my hand and waited a moment, concentrating on my magic. It was a few seconds before Alula danced on my palm, and I was glad to see her. I had missed playing with my magic to pass the time. I studied the Sovereign's expression as I conjured the magical dove, uncertain whether he would be able to see it. I'd met many magicless people who were unable to see my magic, and I wondered if the man before me was any different. I didn't see a look of surprise on his face, in fact, his expression didn't change.

I closed my palm and dropped my hand to my side. "Well, sir?"

He cleared his throat. "As my commanding Elite, I have something special for you. Obviously, I don't expect you to be seen in public looking like that. You get to wear the armor of my Elite."

I scowled at him. "I'm not wearing something covered with diamonds. You know better than most the effect that would have."

"I'm well aware. That's why your armor is different than the rest of my Elite."

I followed his gesture toward the entrance of the room and my

breath caught in my throat. One of his guards carried in a suit of armor made entirely of silver metal. There was no helmet, I assumed because he would like everyone to know that I was his Elite, but there was everything else. It wasn't only metal though. It was covered with diamonds. It looked like they'd been welded into the armor, but it was done so well it wouldn't be hard to believe that the metal naturally came with so many jewels in it.

The Sovereign put his arm around my shoulders and grinned proudly. "What do you think?"

I blinked. What did I think? I thought it was crazy that he expected me to wear that. Maybe the diamonds wouldn't suck away all my magic, but I would certainly be weaker. Come to think of it, that was probably what he wanted. I thought he was a madman. I thought that I had just made the worst mistake in my life.

"I . . . I don't know what to think," I finally said.

"Well, try it on."

He pushed me toward the man who held the thing. I sighed resignedly and let the Elite help me put it on. The metal wasn't terribly heavy and there was black material in some areas to make it more comfortable and easier to move in. When I was fully dressed in the shining attire, none of my skin was visible save my head. Everything from shoulders down, even my hands, was covered in the armor. I was given a sword as well, one that matched the other Elite swords. It was entirely made of diamond and sharp enough to, well, cut open someone's back I supposed.

I sheathed the blade at my hip and ran a hand through my hair. "Do you expect me to wear this all the time?"

"Sebastian, please. You never see my other men without their armor on, do you?"

I thought it best not to mention Teagan. "No."

"Exactly! Now, shall we go to town?" The Sovereign said, already pulling me toward the hall that would take us out of the Keep.

"Why?"

"I want everyone to know that you're my top Elite. You'll be enforcing the rules. Come on."

Despite my better judgment and everything I knew to be right, I followed him out the doors and down the path that would take us into town. It had been a long time since I'd been there, and I dreaded going back. Especially because I knew so many of the people there, and I trusted them. The moment they saw me dressed as an Elite, standing beside the Sovereign, they would never speak to me again.

They would hate me. It wasn't even those people I barely knew I worried about most. My family might still be there, and Julia certainly would. She knew what I had done already, but what would my parents say? What would Sophie think?

I shook my head clear of such things and followed behind the Sovereign. Several of his Elite were marching behind us, but I didn't know why they were coming. He was only going to show me off to everyone, and all his Elite were unnecessary for that. Perhaps there was something else going on that I didn't know about, and that frightened me. I could only imagine whatever he had planned would be something horrific that I wanted no part of.

As we neared the town, people began to come out of their homes and watch us march down the cobbled streets. I absently kept a hand on the hilt of the sword I had been given as anxiety set itself in my heart. As we passed more houses, the people began to follow us into the center of town. I couldn't help but stare as we passed my house, waiting for my sister and my parents to rush out and see what was going on. I waited, glancing over my shoulder for them, but I never saw anyone leave the house. I was glad of that, but something else replaced that feeling with concern. Julia wasn't walking with her mother. I didn't see her anywhere. I had not truly believed the Sovereign would let her go, but I had hoped. Apparently, my hope had been futile because she was not where she belonged.

Our crowd of Elite and villagers finally made it to the center of town where a circle of both guards and residents was formed around the Sovereign and me. A few Elite stayed inside the circle to protect their Sovereign from any potential harm. I lowered my eyes and would not speak to anyone who whispered my name. I didn't want them to believe I was with the Sovereign, but I could not make myself meet their hateful and untrusting gazes. The truth is that I was ashamed. Jules had been right. I could have told the Sovereign about magic, and I could have left the Keep. I should have left the Keep when I had the chance. Instead, because I thought I was protecting her, I had agreed to be his Elite. Now I was in the center of my own town about to be announced as the Sovereign's commanding guard. What a fool I was.

When the Sovereign began to give a speech, I barely listened. I caught a few things here and there about how he always knew I would be a fine guard, and blah blah blah. I couldn't stand to hear him talk about me like he knew what my reasons for this were. Like he knew everything about me. Even with the little I caught, it was

evident that he was lying. I doubt a single sentence from his mouth was entirely true in any way, and it sickened me. This whole ordeal disgusted me.

When he grew quiet and motioned for me to step forward and speak, I raised my head and saw nothing that I thought I would see. I didn't see anger or betrayal in anyone's eyes. In most, I saw confusion and pity, but that was it. They didn't believe whatever the Sovereign had said. I still did not see anyone related to me as I looked around at the people, and I was thankful they'd found somewhere safe to stay.

I took a breath and spoke when the Sovereign nudged me again, though I doubt he would appreciate what I had to say. "I'm sorry that I betrayed all of you, sorrier than words can say, and I'm beginning to regret being here. Perhaps the sight of me wearing this hideous uniform scares you, it scares me, but I need you to know the truth behind my decision." I gestured toward the Sovereign as he glared at me. "The Sovereign has manipulated and lied to all of us. He promised protection, swore his Elite were for our safety and security. Instead, all he offered was control and fear. I put this uniform on because I thought . . . I thought that if I stayed close to the Sovereign, I would be able to protect those I care about. I didn't know how wrong I was, and I hope you can forgive me for that. The moment I stepped into the Keep, I should have been against him. I should have . . ." I paused, unsure whether it would be wise to finish that sentence. I decided it was not, so I changed the way it ended. ". . . I should have done something more. I refuse to believe the Sovereign and I refuse to believe his lies. I only hope all of you do the same."

The second I was done talking, the Sovereign took me by the arm and pulled me toward him. "He doesn't know what he's saying. Sebastian is fragile and he often says things he doesn't mean to say." He smiled at me. "Isn't that right, Sebastian?"

I scowled at him and was about to profusely disagree, but one of his more loyal Elite pressed his blade against the back of neck and concealed the threat from the crowd. I gritted my teeth. "Yes, it's true," I muttered, cursing the Sovereign under my breath.

The cold diamond was removed, but the Sovereign kept a firm grip on my arm. "See? He is difficult at times, but soon he'll be unconditionally loyal." He gestured to the Elite in the crowd, and they came forward. I heard him whisper something to them, but I couldn't understand a word of it. "Today, you will all witness where his heart truly lies. I have two prisoners who were sentenced to death, and what better . . ."

I blocked his voice from my ears. I couldn't believe what he was saying. That time I had asked about killing, I hadn't honestly believed he would ask that of me. Didn't he know I wouldn't do that? Did he think that I would be more compelled to do it in front of a crowd? Killing wasn't even the worst of it. I knew who the two prisoners he spoke of would be. There were only two people he would ask me to kill, two people I would sooner give my own life for.

"Here they are now," the Sovereign finished.

I watched as Teagan and Julia were pushed to their knees before the Sovereign. Neither one of them looked to be in good health. Jules was bruised and a trickle of blood leaked from the edge of her mouth. Teagan's nose was crooked and bloody, he looked like he'd missed several weeks of sleep, and I noticed that he was hunched over in pain. I wanted nothing more than to fall on my knees and heal them with magic. At the very least, I would rather be there with chains around my wrists than see either of them kneeling before me.

"Today, my good people, your Commanding Elite will save you from these traitors. Today, you will never have to fear again because he will protect you, as I have protected you. With me as his Sovereign, there is nothing he will not do for you." The Sovereign turned to me, and his fake smile disappeared. He spoke in a low voice that only I would be able to hear. "Kill them, Sebastian. You told me you would be my Elite, and this is how you do that. Kill them both, or you will watch them die anyway, and then you will suffer." I didn't move. "Unsheathe your sword and kill them!"

I closed my eyes briefly and thought over my plan again. I nodded at the Sovereign. "All right. I'll kill them."

He relaxed a little as I pulled my diamond blade from its sheath. I knelt before Julia and smiled sadly. "Julia, I'm so sorry."

Tears shone in her eyes and fell down her cheeks. "Sebastian, you don't have to do this. Please. I thought you loved me."

I frowned. "I do love you."

She shook her head. "If you loved me, you would never kill me for the sake of protecting everyone else."

"Jules, you don't understand. Either both of you die, or everyone dies. I can't let that happen. I'm sorry."

She closed her eyes and turned away from me as I pressed the blade to her heart. I took a deep breath and pushed the blade through her chest. She screamed and crumpled onto the cobblestones, deep red staining the rocks. I wiped a hand over my eyes and went to Teagan, my hands shaking terribly. At that moment, I wasn't using

any magic though it felt like the diamonds were still sucking it out of me. He scowled at me and got in one good kick to my gut before the Elite restrained him. Obviously, with the armor on it did nothing more than cause me to stumble back a pace.

"Teagan, listen. I shouldn't have told the Sovereign about you. It was stupid and selfish and I'm sorry that I have to kill you," I whispered.

He rolled his eyes and glared at me, but it only lasted for a short time before he sighed. "Sebastian, I understand why you did it. I don't care about that. What's really bothering me is that you're about to kill me. For what reason?"

"So that everyone else can live."

"Why not just kill the Sovereign? Use your magic."

"His Elite would kill me before I ever had a chance to kill their Sovereign. Teagan, forgive me."

I put a hand on his shoulder and pushed the tip of the blade through his chest. He cried out and fell forward as I removed my sword, wiping the tears away and pushing myself to my feet. I sheathed my blade and turned to the Sovereign. He stared at me for a moment, looking shocked that I had really just done that to my friends. I turned away from him and away from the crowd and began to walk away toward the Keep. I was sick and tired of seeing them accept things like that. I knew they were terrified of the Sovereign and probably of me, but they still should have tried to do something. I tried to block their cries out of my head as I walked, especially when I heard Julia's mother scream at me. I regretted that I had done what I had done, but there was no way of changing it.

Someone grabbed my arm as I neared the gate to the yard of the Keep, and I resignedly turned toward whoever it was. I suppose I'd been expecting to see the Sovereign or one of his idiot Elite. That was not at all who I saw. I saw my little sister and there were tears that streamed down her pale cheeks. I dropped to my knees and pulled her into an embrace. As we separated, I kept my hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her.

She put her hands on her hips, still with tears in her eyes. "Why did you do that, Sebastian? You killed Julia!" she screamed at me.
"Why did you do it?"

"Sophie, you don't understand. I had to do that, but—"

"NO! You didn't have to do anything! Whatever the Sovereign did to you took you away from me!" She shrugged my hands away

from her.

"No, she isn't dead. Sophie, I promise I would never, ever, do something like that."

"I don't believe you. You killed her and that other guy, and I hate you!" She flung herself at me and halfheartedly slapped my back.

I wrapped my arms around her and held her, glancing at the Elite still in town. They weren't coming back yet, which I was glad for. I would have had time to take my sister somewhere safe, but then the Sovereign would wonder where I had been, and I was too rundown to deal with any of that. So I stayed with my sister until she was calm again and ready to listen.

"Will you listen to me now?" I asked gently, holding her by the shoulders again and brushing her tears away.

"How could you say that she's alive, Sebastian? I saw you kill her. She fell over and then her mother came and . . ." Her eyes filled with tears again.

I shook my head. "No. We had a plan. I can tell you about it later, but right now I need you to go back to Mother and Father. Didn't they come home?"

She furrowed her brows and wiped away her tears, finally believing me. "No. I didn't see them. Did you really help them escape? They're here?"

I swiped my hand down my face and ran my fingers through my hair. If Mother and Father hadn't gone home, then where were they? What had they been doing all this time? "Sophie, I need you to listen to me carefully. I want you to go home and stay there. Wait for me. Don't let anyone inside unless it's me, all right? Can you do that for me?"

"What are you going to do?"

"That doesn't matter. Promise me that you're going to do as I say. Please."

She nodded. "Yes, I'll go home and lock the door. But . . . What if Mother and Father come?"

"Well, then you can let them in, but you need to lock the door back and don't let anyone else in. And don't let them leave either. Do you understand?"

"I understand. How long should I wait for you?"

"As long as it takes. I promise I'll come and get you. Now go, Sophie, and stay away from the Elite."

She scowled at my outfit. "Too late for that."

I winced at her remark. "I love you. Please be careful."

She kissed me on the cheek and turned on her heel, walking away to town like nothing in the world concerned her except rainbows and butterflies. I watched her go until she scampered from my view and then I spun around and returned to the Keep. I was walking up the stairs to my room by the time I heard the Sovereign and his Elite enter the Keep. I went into my room and stared through the window aimlessly until the Sovereign came into my room.

He put a hand on my shoulder, and I had to restrain myself from shoving him away and drawing my sword. "You truly are loyal to me, Sebastian. What you did was terrible, but I'm glad to know you'll do anything I ask."

I made myself indifferent before speaking. "Of course, sir."

"You should get some rest. Tomorrow there's something else I want you to do. You see, there's that old house where your parents once lived, and it's been bothering me. I want you to get rid of it by any means necessary on the morrow."

I turned to him and nodded without expression. "Very well, sir."

The Sovereign nodded in satisfaction and disappeared through the door. I took a deep breath and lay on my bed, keeping my Elite uniform on, save the sword. It wasn't comfortable, even without the sword, but I didn't need comfort. I didn't plan on sleeping that night. Rather, I was going to stay awake until I knew for certain that the Sovereign himself was asleep, and then I was going to return to town.

It was a long time of lying awake and forcing myself to stay awake before I felt sure most of the residents in the Keep would be snoring. I pulled open the door to my room as quietly as I could and snuck downstairs, walking quietly down the hall. Not many Elite were stationed in their usual spots which meant their Sovereign had left them in town to keep an eye on things. I released a relieved breath as I walked past the gate that led to the ground of the Keep and picked up my pace down the cobbled street.

Obviously, since I had waited until near midnight, everyone was inside with their lights turned out. I made my way toward the center of town, where Julia and Teagan's bodies would be. No one would have wanted to bury them the day they were killed. I didn't know why, but it was not my place to ask so I never said anything about the strange tradition. As I came closer to the town's middle, however, I noticed that it was empty. There were no bodies and no Elite to guard them.

I turned away and started toward Julia's house, dodging a few Elite in the process. I went to the back entrance and knocked lightly on the door twice. Fortunately for me, it was not Mrs. Huffle who stood before me when the door opened. It was Teagan and he was very much alive, albeit hurting from previous injuries.

"Is Jules there too?" I whispered.

"Yeah," he muttered.

"I apologize for getting you into this, Teagan. I really am so sorry, and I hope you can forgive one day."

He smiled tiredly. "Sebastian, you saved my life with magic and wine. I think that's enough of an apology."

My shoulders and heart relaxed as I stepped into the house and shut the door, locking it behind me. I followed Teagan to the sitting room and found Julia asleep in a chair. I sat down on the couch and turned to Teagan as he slowly took a seat, wincing and grabbing his side. I held up my hand and let Alula dance in my palm.

"Do you want me to heal you?" I asked.

"Please."

I asked him to lie down as I placed one hand on his forehead and the other on his chest. He slumped in relief immediately and closed his eyes. I figured his magic was drained from healing me and from using invisibility magic. Not on himself, but on two bottles of wine. You recall that I told him and Jules something when I was sick? Well, look back if you don't. I told them both a plan I had because I knew the Sovereign was going to ask me to kill them. I had always known he would ask that of me because he didn't just want me as his personal Elite. He wanted me to be loyal to him, and the only way he knew how to make me loyal was to take away everything else I was loyal to. Except he would ask me to do it to myself. Anyway, my plan was simple, and it had worked to perfection.

Since the Sovereign was always drinking a glass of wine, it had been an easy thing for Teagan to make two glasses invisible and take them. (By the way, when things are magically invisible, they kind of disappear entirely). He hid one under his shirt over his heart where it would neither be noticed nor felt. Obviously, he also had to use some magic to protect the glass from breaking. To Julia, he did the same exact same thing. When they'd been brought to the town's center was when I had to "kill" them. I pretended to be teary and sad because the Sovereign and the crowd had to believe what they were seeing. I stabbed them both, directly over their hearts, and they cried out so that the glass could not be heard when it shattered. I used my

own magic to make them both fall asleep the moment they screamed. Then I had used magic to make sure the glass pieces wouldn't be seen, and the rest was up to everyone's eyes. I was sure if anyone had paid enough attention, they would have noticed that the wine was too thin to be blood. Thankfully, the people had believed their eyes enough not to question what was happening.

That was the truth of what happened that day. I would never kill anyone, unless for self-defense. Now, back to what was happening in Julia's house.

Teagan fell asleep when I finished healing him, so I went to Julia's side and put my hand on her forehead and one on her back and did the same thing to her. I felt a little weak and dizzy when I stood because my magic was weaker due to the diamonds on my armor, but I ignored that and tried to leave the house the way I'd come. As I was about to pull the door closed, someone touched my arm, and I spun around.

Mrs. Huffle gave me a tiny smile. "Thank you, Sebastian," she breathed.

I nodded. "Always."

I intended to search for Mother and Father, but I figured they had to be home, and Sophie just hadn't looked well, or she hadn't been there since they'd been there. Either way, I decided I wasn't going to do that. I walked back toward the Keep since I had gone to town only to make sure my friends were well. I needed to do something about the Sovereign and his Elite now. He could not be allowed to control everything because then he would destroy everything, and I could not in good conscious let that happen.

As I neared the Keep, I put my hand on the hilt of my sword, except it wasn't there. There was nowhere to place my hand. I recalled removing my sword to sleep last night and I hadn't put it back on. I supposed I was too unused to wearing something like that, and it felt more natural to me without it. I cursed my stupidity and turned my attention back to the Keep. I began to grow uneasy the closer I got because there were no Elite around anywhere. It was, and I don't say this lightly, eerily quiet.

The second I went inside the Sovereign's home, I realized exactly why that was. All his Elite were in the Keep, waiting for me at the door. One of them wrested my arms behind my back while another kicked me hard enough that I was sure my ribs bruised even under the armor. I doubled over as much as I could and choked on my own breath. I didn't have much time to recover before the guard

restraining me hit me hard between my shoulders, and I crumpled to the ground where several of them kicked me viciously. When they dragged me to my feet, I saw several dents in my Elite uniform. One of them kicked the back of my legs and I fell to my hands and knees. They tore the armor from my body and finally yanked me to my feet when the Sovereign came in holding my sword in one hand and his traditional glass of wine in the other.

"Let me show you something, Sebastian," he said, stepping in front of me and raising his cup. He dipped the tip of my sword into the wine and held it there for a moment, then pulled it out and it dripped a deep red. "It looks an awful lot like blood, doesn't it? Perhaps a bit thin, but it could do the trick if people neglected to pay attention. What do you think?"

I had to take several breaths before I was able to speak. I couldn't stand up straight because that sent me gasping in pain, but I was at least able to lift my head and look him in the eye. "Figure that out yourself, did you?"

He glared at me and dropped the glass of wine at my feet. With the amount of that beverage I had seen him drink, I was fairly stunned that he didn't wince as the glass shattered over my shoes. "For a brief while I thought, I really thought, that you had turned to my side. That you would be my Elite and I could eventually figure out how to get magic myself. I see now how wrong I was to ever put an inch of trust in you. You're a traitor to me and you'll never be anything more than that, Sebastian. I would kill you now, the same way I killed your parents, but I have more important things to do." He reached over to pat my shoulder, but I shrugged his hand away. "I hope you were looking forward to a stay in my dungeons."

At this point, I was just glad he hadn't run me through with a sword. "Honestly, anywhere is better than being in the same room as you," I spat.

The Sovereign did not like that. He picked up my sword and I regretted the thought I'd just had. He walked behind me where I couldn't see him and pressed the blade to the right of my middle back. I screamed when he pressed the weapon into me, crumpling to the floor despite the men holding me up. They let me go and any pain I had felt before disappeared with the overwhelming shock of being run through with a sword, then having it pulled out. I felt my magic working slowly to heal me, but I wasn't sure whether that would be enough to do anything. The Sovereign pulled me to my feet and pressed me against the wall even as I hunched over in pain.

"I'm sorry you made me do this, Sebastian. Maybe it would be kinder for me to bring you along. Put you out of your misery."

I forced myself to straighten up and I glared at him. "Go ahead." He shrugged. "All right."

One of his Elite left for a moment and returned with metal chains in his hands. I was spun around, and my wrists were cuffed together. After that, we walked out of the Keep and went down the path to town. Truth be told, I didn't do much walking. Two Elite dragged me between them. I didn't have it in me to walk and being carried seemed so much easier. I noticed people come out of their homes and recalled when I had been asked to kill my friends not long ago. The difference this time was that I would be killed.

We moved quickly to the center of town, surprised and frightened looks on the faces of most everyone I saw. On others I saw pity and on a select few I noticed hatred. Whether for me or the Sovereign, I did not know. I was made to kneel in the middle of the crowd so everyone could see me as the Elite pushed me to my knees. They were actually doing more in holding me up than holding me down, though I didn't let them know that. I scanned the faces of everyone before me and noticed, amongst them, Teagan and Jules. It looked like Teagan was holding Julia back from running toward me, something I was thankful for. I had a plan, anyway, and it didn't involve my death.

As the Sovereign began to give one of his age long speeches, I hung my head and focused on breaking my chains. That would be much harder to do since my magic was draining every moment, but I figured I might as well try. I could feel my magic trying to go into the chains and burst out, shattering the metal, but it wasn't strong enough. It was lucky I had another plan.

When the Sovereign finished talking, I lifted my head and winced as I forced my feet to hold me up. I spoke directly to the man before me. "Please, let me say goodbye to my friends. I'm begging you. Please, sir," I whispered. Talking hurt. Well, everything hurt.

He looked me over and rolled his eyes. "If you can make it there on your feet, then I will allow it."

I muttered a thank you and the guards let me go. I stumbled over to Teagan and Jules, grateful they were in the front of the crowd. I nearly collapsed when I stood before them, but each of them put a steady hand on my arm. I gave Julia a little smile and faced Teagan.

"I'm going to tell you how to give me some of your magic," I

breathed.

He raised a brow. "Don't you want me to heal you instead? Sebastian, you're dying, and you want magic? What's that going to do?"

"It's going to do everything. Teagan, please. Trust me on this. Please."

"Why won't you let me heal you?"

"You can't. It will be too obvious, and I'd probably pass out."

He shook his head. "Okay. What do I do?"

"I mean, you're already touching me so just push your magic into my body."

Teagan closed his eyes and for a minute I felt nothing, and I began to worry. Then I felt the magic spill into me, filling me with, well, magic. I let his hand stay there for a time before I pushed it away to prevent him from giving me all his own magic. I nodded at him and staggered back to the Sovereign, where his Elite were quick to grab me and hold me still. The man who loved wine more than life lifted my own blade and put it against my neck. I cringed and let the diamond-crusted blade slice into my skin. Then I broke the chains with magic and the Elite all around fell asleep. The entire crowd save my friends fell to the ground in a deep sleep they would only wake from hours later. I reached up and grabbed the Sovereign's wrist, twisting it with a strength my magic lent me. The sword dropped to the ground and the Sovereign fell to his knees, grasping his hand when I released him and holding it to his chest. I knelt beside him and grabbed the sword.

"You don't know what you're about to do, boy. Killing someone isn't easy, you know."

I took a breath. "I know. Your Elite will be given a chance to renounce their loyalty to you or to live the rest of their lives in your dungeons. For you, I will not be so forgiving. For every life you have taken or endangered, and for every life that you own, your death will redeem them all. You won't own anyone, and you will never harm anyone again. The people you killed will be at rest and, though it does pain me a little to say it, I'm sorry that it has to be this way."

I used the sword and then dropped it to the ground, every ounce of strength in me failing and all my magic leaving me. I crawled away from everything in the center of town and fell into Julia and Teagan's arms. My ribs ached, my back hurt so much, everything else on and in me was bruised and sore. The adrenaline that kept me on my feet leaked out of me then and I slumped in their arms.

XXX

When I came to, I still hurt basically everywhere despite Teagan's healing hands pressed against my biggest injury. I groaned and looked around, recognizing my own home. I was on the couch at a distance from the fireplace, though I still felt cold. Julia was leaning over the back of the couch, staring at nothing and trying not to cry. Sophie was there too, squeezing Rufus into her body as she knelt beside the couch where my head was. I rubbed my eyes and smiled tiredly at her.

"I told you I would come and get you, Sophie," I whispered.

She released her dog and threw her arms around me instead.

"Oh, Sebastian! You really did come this time. I missed you. I waited and waited and when they brought you through the door . . ."

I winced and had to push her gently off me. "That hurts."

She brushed away tears and grinned at me, nodding toward Julia. I didn't say anything to her, and I didn't have to. She understood everything I could have told her in an instant. I pulled myself up and kissed Jules, dropping back to the couch with a muffled cry. Teagan shook his head at me and threw his hands up.

"If you're going to be like this, then I'm not even going to try to heal you," he muttered.

I relaxed and closed my eyes to rest them. "Thank you, Teagan. You . . . Well, I would be dead if not for you and there are no words in the world that can express my gratitude."

He tried to hide it, but I caught his smile. "You can thank me when I'm done healing you. You really took a beating this time, and it's going to take time and patience before I'm done."

I grinned. "Wake me when you're finished."



Magic, Elite, and the Sovereign.

The Sovereign is trying to take over the world with his Elite. To do that, he needs to know the secret of magic that only Sebastian's parents know. When Sebastian becomes the only person to know that secret, however, his life is grave danger.